MYTHS, LIES, MARKETING, AND CONTROL

WHO PROFITS FROM WHAT YOU ALREADY BELIEVE

By M.R.Alo

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A WORK OF NARRATIVE NONFICTION

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"Most of what we call common sense was, at some point, somebody's strategy."

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A Note Before We Begin

Here is what this book is not.

It is not an argument against medicine, against capitalism, against sugar, against vaccines, against any single industry you could name. If you came looking for a villain, you will be disappointed. There isn't one. There is something far more interesting, and far harder to put a face to: a system in which good people, working in good faith, inside legal and often well-intentioned institutions, keep arriving at conclusions that happen to be extremely profitable. That is not a conspiracy. A conspiracy would almost be a relief, because conspiracies have endings. This does not. And because a book this willing to point at incentives owes you proof it isn't just pointing, I'll tell you now, plainly, what's waiting in Part Two: an entire chapter, built from real cases, where the system corrected itself faster and more honestly than this book's own logic would have predicted going in. I'm not saving it as a twist. I'm telling you it exists, on page one, so that every chapter between here and there gets read as an honest accounting instead of a slow walk toward a verdict I'd already reached.

I'll say one more thing about the title, since a title with the word *Control* in it understandably arrives carrying certain expectations — a hidden cabal, a smoking-gun document, the moment the curtain finally pulls back on the people secretly running everything. This book will not give you that moment, and I'd rather tell you so on this page than let you discover it disappointed on page Ninety-four. What it gives you instead, I hope, is something that survives multiple

readings better than a single dramatic reveal ever could: a way of noticing, on your own, in your own kitchen, the next time a belief arrives dressed up as something you always just knew.

So here is what this book is.

It is an attempt to answer one question as plainly as I can ask it: how does an idea travel from a marketing department, a research grant, a thirty-second advertisement, into your unquestioned, inherited sense of how the world simply *is*? How does a strategy become a tradition? How does a sales pitch become a memory, passed down at a kitchen table, three generations deep, until nobody alive remembers it was ever a pitch at all?

I did not set out to write a book about cereal, or opioids, or diamonds, or, by the time I finished this pass, dating apps. I set out to understand my own grandmother's kitchen — the rules she lived by, the things she was certain of, the inherited common sense she handed to me the way her mother had handed it to her. Somewhere in trying to understand where her certainty came from, I found an industry standing behind nearly every one of her convictions, quietly, patiently, for decades. That discovery is not an accusation. It is an invitation — to ask the same question about your own certainties that I started asking about hers.

A word on rigor, because the subjects here — food, medicine, money, love, belief — invite exactly the kind of casual citation that gives nonfiction a bad name. Where I describe a documented historical episode, I have stayed close to the public record: court filings, regulatory findings, contemporaneous reporting, the kind of paper trail that exists precisely because these industries are large

enough to leave one. Where I am offering interpretation rather than established fact, I have tried to say so plainly. This is a work of narrative nonfiction, not an investigative exposé with footnoted certainty on every line, and I would rather underclaim than overclaim. A full accounting of sources, and a short list of further reading for anyone who wants to keep going after this book ends, sits in the back, where it belongs — present, but not getting in the way of the story.

You will meet three people in these pages who are not employees of any industry, who have no stake in any outcome, and who taught me more about belief than any study could. My grandmother, who built her entire kitchen around convictions she never once questioned, until, near the end, she questioned all of them at once. Marcus, my brother-in-law, who has spent twenty years rolling his eyes at people like me, and who I will ask you to trust completely by the middle of this book, because by then he will have earned it the hard way. And Theo, his son, who is eleven years old and has already been marketed to more times than his great-grandmother was in her entire life, and who will, someday, in a chapter I almost didn't have the nerve to write, be marketed to about love itself.

This isn't a conspiracy. It's an inheritance. Let's go find out what we were left.

One more thing, added because early readers asked for it directly, and kept in every pass since because it has only become more necessary: this is not a book that belongs to one side of an argument you've already been having for years. The instinct to distrust an unaccountable corporation and the instinct to distrust an

unaccountable stranger selling a cure from a kitchen table are, as far as I can tell, the exact same instinct, pointed in two directions that our current moment insists on assigning to opposite political teams. If a chapter ahead makes you want to aim it at an industry you already distrusted, and a later chapter makes you want to aim it at a movement you already distrusted, I'd ask you to sit with that discomfort rather than resolve it by deciding the book secretly agrees with you. It doesn't. It isn't trying to. The discomfort is, genuinely, the point. I expect this book to get quoted, eventually, by people on both sides of arguments I'm not having, each one certain the other half of the book was the part I didn't really mean. I'd rather be misquoted equally by everyone than correctly claimed by anyone.

Introduction: The Inheritance

My grandmother kept three boxes of cereal in the cupboard, always the same three, and if you asked her why, she would tell you — same as her mother had told her — that they were "the healthy ones." Whole grain. Fortified. A doctor's idea, originally, she said, like that settled it. And in a way, she wasn't wrong. The story does start with a doctor. It starts with a sanitarium in Battle Creek, Michigan, in the eighteen-eighties, and a man who believed that a bowl of toasted flakes could save a person's health along with his digestion. I will tell you that whole story in the next chapter, because it is, genuinely, one of my favorites. But I am getting ahead of myself, because this book isn't really about cereal. It's about my grandmother's certainty, and where certainty like that comes from, and why so much of it — yours included, I would bet — was built for someone else's benefit before it ever became yours.

Here is the central claim of this book, stated as plainly as I know how to state it: most of what we call "common sense" was, at some point, somebody's strategy. Not always cynically. Not always successfully. But somewhere behind a startling number of our settled convictions — about food, about medicine, about love, about money, about what is "natural" and what is "normal" — there is a person or an institution who needed you to believe a specific thing, and who was patient enough, and well-funded enough, to wait while that belief calcified into instinct.

This is not a conspiracy theory, and I want to be careful about that distinction because the two get confused constantly, and the

confusion does real damage. A conspiracy theory says: a small group of people secretly control outcomes according to a hidden plan. What I am describing is both more boring and more unsettling than that. It says: large numbers of people, working separately, with no plan and very little coordination, keep discovering that the same handful of beliefs are extraordinarily profitable to encourage — and so encourage them, year after year, decade after decade, until the encouragement disappears into the wallpaper and what's left looks exactly like truth.

I learned to see this pattern slowly, and mostly by accident, through two people I love who could not be more different from each other. The first is my brother-in-law, Marcus, who installs HVAC systems for a living, distrusts almost everything that arrives in his inbox, and has a default response to people like me — people who say things like "well, actually, that started as a marketing campaign" — that I can only describe as a weary, affectionate eye-roll. Marcus thinks I see conspiracies in light fixtures. For a long time, I thought he was probably right to think so.

The second is Marcus's son, my nephew Theo, who is eleven, who has never lived in a world without a recommendation algorithm, and who forms beliefs at a speed and from sources that neither his father nor I can fully track. Theo did not inherit his convictions at a kitchen table over twenty years, the way my grandmother did. He inherits dozens of them a day, in fifteen-second increments, from a machine that has no opinions of its own but is exceptionally good at finding the ones that will keep him watching. He is going to grow up, date, fall in love, and get his heart broken inside systems built by people

who have run the numbers on exactly how long they can keep him doing all three before he finds someone and logs off for good. I didn't know that when I started writing this book. I do now, and it changed a chapter I almost left out.

Between my grandmother's cupboard and Theo's phone sits roughly a century of the same basic transaction, wearing different clothes. That transaction is what this book is actually about.

I've organized what follows into four parts, and I want to tell you honestly why, because the order matters. Part One looks at the most intimate myth-delivery systems we have — what we eat, who we marry, what we're shown — because we defend our beliefs about these things with unusual ferocity, the ferocity reserved for whatever touches our bodies, our children, and our hearts at once. Part Two looks at medicine, because medicine raises the stakes: when the belief in question concerns healing and dying, the incentive to manufacture certainty becomes, if anything, more powerful, not less — and, just as importantly, because medicine is also where I found the clearest evidence that incentive isn't destiny, which is a thread I follow all the way through this part rather than leaving for the very end. Part Three steps back from any single industry and asks the harder question — not who benefits from this belief, but how does a belief like this get made in the first place, and why do some myths outlive the companies that built them by a hundred years, and what happens to all of this when the thing doing the telling is no longer a person at all? And Part Four, which did not exist in the earliest drafts of this book and which I think is now the most important part of it, asks what we are supposed to do with all of this. Knowing how myths

are made is only useful if it leaves you more capable of trust, not less. A skepticism that corrodes everything is just despair wearing a lab coat. I am not interested in handing you that. I am interested in handing you something sturdier.

I'm going to give you that sturdier thing by name, eventually — four small questions my grandmother handed me three weeks before she died, the closest thing this book has to a tool you can actually carry out of it. I'm not going to give them to you yet. You have to earn them the way I did, chapter by chapter, the same slow way she earned the right to ask them herself, late in her life, after believing the wrong things for most of it. A book that spent two hundred pages taking apart belief after belief and never handed you anything to rebuild with would just be cruelty with footnotes. This one isn't that. But the questions will mean more to you on the other side of this book than they would on this side of it, so we're going to do this in order.

So: three people, four parts, four questions waiting at the end, and one thesis underneath all of it, which I'll ask again at the very end, when we have earned the right to actually try answering it. For now, let's start where I started. Let's go back to the cupboard.

PART ONE — WHAT WE EAT

Before it is a belief, it is a habit. Before it is a habit, it is a hunger somebody noticed first.

Chapter One — The Sanitarium in the Cereal Aisle

The breakfast cereal aisle, in its purest original form, was a wing of a sanitarium.

I love that sentence so much that I made you sit with it for a second before I explained it, because it is true, and because almost nobody knows it, and because it tells you everything you need to know about how a strategy becomes a tradition.

In 1876, a doctor named John Harvey Kellogg took over a health resort in Battle Creek, Michigan, and built it into one of the most famous medical institutions in America — the Battle Creek Sanitarium, a place wealthy Americans went to be cured of, depending on the decade, nervous exhaustion, indigestion, or simply modern life. Kellogg had strong, occasionally unusual theories about diet and self-discipline, and not all of his thinking has aged well, to put it gently. But one piece of it endured spectacularly: Kellogg believed that a bland, dry, easily digestible grain product, eaten at breakfast, was a cornerstone of physical health. He and his brother, Will Keith Kellogg, spent years experimenting with boiled, rolled, and toasted grains in the sanitarium kitchen, looking for exactly that product.

What they landed on were flakes of toasted corn. The patients liked them. That, on its own, should have been the end of the story — a minor footnote in the history of institutional food service. Instead, Will Keith Kellogg looked at what his brother considered a medical product and saw something else entirely: a business. Over John's

strenuous objection, Will added sugar to the recipe, founded a separate company, and built one of the most successful marketing operations of the twentieth century around a food whose entire original premise was that it had been prescribed.

That word — prescribed — is the hinge this whole chapter turns on. The earliest cereal advertising didn't sell flavor, because there wasn't much flavor to sell. It sold authority. It borrowed the credibility of the sanitarium, the doctor, the institution, and transferred it directly onto the cardboard box, and it worked so completely that within two generations, nobody needed the doctor anymore. The box had absorbed his credibility permanently. My grandmother, born decades after John Harvey Kellogg's specific theories had been quietly retired by actual medicine, still called her cereal "the healthy one" in a tone that closed the conversation. She wasn't citing a source. She didn't need to. The source had been built directly into the word *healthy* itself.

I think about this every time someone tells me a habit is "just common sense." Common sense has to come from somewhere. It doesn't generate spontaneously out of collective experience, however much we'd like to believe it does; it gets installed, early and quietly, usually by whoever has the clearest financial interest in installing it; and then it gets defended by people who have absolutely no financial interest in it at all, which is the part that should actually surprise us. My grandmother had nothing to gain from her loyalty to that cupboard. She just had decades of unexamined inheritance, dressed up as instinct.

I asked Marcus once, half-joking, whether he'd ever looked up what was actually in his favorite cereal as a kid. He laughed at me — the eye-roll, on schedule — and said, "It's cereal. It's not supposed to be a conspiracy, man, it's breakfast." He's right that it isn't a conspiracy. Nobody at a boardroom table in 1906 was plotting to control the American diet for a hundred years. What happened was smaller and, I'd argue, more interesting: one good business decision, repeated successfully enough times by enough competitors, calcified into an entire culture's definition of a normal morning. Nobody had to keep pulling the lever. The lever got built into the cupboard.

That's the pattern I want you to start noticing, because we are going to see it again and again in the chapters ahead, in industries with far higher stakes than breakfast. A useful idea gets discovered. The idea gets attached to authority. The authority fades, but the idea — now wearing the authority's old clothes — survives on its own, indefinitely, defended by people with nothing to gain except the comfort of not having to ask where their certainty came from.

My grandmother's cupboard wasn't a conspiracy. It was a very old advertisement that had successfully disguised itself as a memory. We're going to find a lot more of those.

Chapter Two — The Quiet Architects of Sweetness

In 1965, an industry trade group called the Sugar Research Foundation paid a group of Harvard scientists to produce a literature review on diet and heart disease. The review, published in a major medical journal, concluded that fat — not sugar — was the primary dietary concern behind heart disease. The funding arrangement was not disclosed to readers. It would stay undisclosed for over fifty years, until historians digging through internal industry archives published the documents in 2016, by which point the fat-is-the-enemy, sugar-is-basically-fine framework had shaped half a century of nutrition guidance, food labeling, and dinner-table conversation across an entire country.

I want to be careful here, the way I promised to be careful in the note at the front of this book. The scientists involved were real researchers with real careers, not hired hands inventing data from nothing; the broader science of nutrition is genuinely complicated, and fat is not harmless; and one funded literature review, however influential, did not single-handedly create modern food culture. But it didn't need to do all the work alone. It needed only to nudge a public conversation that was already underway, at a moment when nobody was positioned to push back, and then let the resulting consensus run on its own momentum for two generations. That's the quiet part. Nobody had to keep paying for the belief once the belief was self-sustaining.

My grandmother, raising children through exactly that era, fought sugar far less hard than she fought fat. Margarine sat proudly on her counter, marketed as the smart, heart-healthy alternative to butter, for the same basic reason: an entire research and labeling apparatus had spent a generation teaching her where to direct her vigilance. She wasn't uninformed. She was extremely well informed, by precisely the people who'd decided which information she should have.

This is where Marcus usually stops me, and fairly. "So what," he said, the night I tried to explain all this over his kitchen table, "every food company funds research. You think soda companies are the only ones doing this? You think the people telling you sugar's evil don't have an agenda too?" He's not wrong, and I told him so. There is no neutral funding source standing outside this entire ecosystem, waiting to hand us the unbiased truth — that's a fantasy, and chasing it is its own kind of trap, one I'll come back to directly in Part Three. The point isn't that one side is pure and the other corrupt. The point is that an enormous amount of what feels like settled nutritional "common sense" was shaped, at some identifiable historical moment, by someone with a direct financial stake in which way the science seemed to lean — and that almost none of us, including the people most confidently repeating that common sense today, know which moments those were.

What strikes me most, looking back at the Sugar Research Foundation archives, isn't the deception. Deception, on its own, is just a scandal, and scandals fade. What strikes me is the half-life. A single funded study from 1965 was still actively shaping how my

generation read nutrition labels in the 2000s, forty years and several scientific corrections later, because the belief had stopped needing its original source by then. It had become a habit of attention: look hard at fat, glance past sugar. Nobody had to enforce that habit. We did it to ourselves, faithfully, for decades, on behalf of an institution most of us had never heard of and a study most of us never read.

That's the real architecture sugar built — not a conspiracy to make us sick, but something subtler and harder to dismantle: a permanent tilt in where we look first. The tilt outlived the funding by half a century. It will probably outlive this book, too. The best I can do, and the best I think any of us can do, is notice it on purpose, which is a small thing, but it's the only thing that's actually ours to do.

Chapter Three — A Diamond Is Just a Rock

Here is a fact that astonishes nearly everyone the first time they hear it: diamonds are not naturally rare. By the standards of actual geology, they are comparatively common; what has been rare, for most of the twentieth century, was the supply allowed onto the market, controlled for decades by a small number of companies, the largest of which was De Beers. Scarcity, in the diamond business, was not discovered. It was manufactured, deliberately and with enormous patience, and then sold to the public as though it were a fact of nature.

The truly remarkable part isn't the supply control, though. It's the advertising. In 1947, an advertising agency working for De Beers coined four words that would do more to shape Western romantic tradition than perhaps any sentence written that century: "A diamond is forever." The campaign didn't just sell diamonds. It quietly helped invent the custom of the diamond engagement ring as we now understand it, attached the size of that diamond to the depth of a man's love and his financial seriousness, and eventually — through decades of careful, repeated suggestion in advertising and editorial content alike — arrived at a specific, widely "known" rule: a man should spend roughly two months' salary on the ring. There was no tradition behind that number. There was a marketing department, and a number that tested well.

I bought my wife's engagement ring at twenty-six, with money I genuinely did not have, telling myself the entire time that I was simply doing what was done — that this was tradition, the way a

wedding toast or a first dance was tradition, something handed down rather than sold. It took me years to learn that the tradition I thought I was honoring was younger than my own grandmother. She married in 1958, with a ring far smaller and plainer than what I bought, not because love mattered less to her generation but because the "rule" I was unconsciously obeying hadn't fully calcified into folklore yet when she was a bride. By the time it reached me, two generations later, it didn't feel like marketing. It felt like an obligation older than memory.

This is the cleanest example in the whole book of the difference between a lie and a myth, and I think the distinction matters enough to spell out plainly. A lie is a false statement someone tells you. A myth is a story that becomes true enough to act on, regardless of where it started — and a sufficiently successful myth doesn't even need anyone left alive who remembers inventing it. Nobody at any diamond company has to keep insisting on the two-months'-salary rule today. The rule survives entirely on its own momentum, repeated by jewelers who never met an executive at the original ad agency, defended by grooms who would be offended at the suggestion that their devotion has a marketing department's fingerprints on it.

Theo, eleven and uninterested in marriage in any way whatsoever, asked me once why people even do the ring thing, since "you could just, like, tell someone you love them." I didn't have a good answer that wasn't this entire chapter, so I gave him the short version: a company needed people to buy more diamonds, so it helped convince an entire culture that love had a specific, escalating price

tag, and the convincing worked so well that we now hand the bill to our children as though it were wisdom.

He thought about that for a second and said, "That's kind of messed up," which is, honestly, the correct response, and also not the end of the story. Because the love itself — mine for my wife, my grandmother's for my grandfather — was never the lie. The myth didn't create the feeling. It just attached itself to the feeling, like a tax nobody remembers voting for, and collected on it for seventy-five years. Recognizing that doesn't make the ring on my wife's hand mean less to either of us. It just means I finally know what I was actually buying, and what I wasn't.

What it also means, and what I didn't expect to learn until I started researching the next chapter, is that the ring was only ever the opening move. The diamond industry needed to convince you of one big purchase, once, at a single identifiable moment, the night of the proposal. The industry I'm about to describe needed something harder and, in its way, more impressive: it needed to convince you to keep paying, a little at a time, indefinitely, for the chance to get to that moment in the first place.

Chapter Four — The Compatibility Score

Nobody builds a subscription business around helping you delete the app in a month.

My grandmother met my grandfather at a church social in 1956, introduced by her own aunt, who had known his mother for thirty years and vouched for him the way people vouched for each other before vouching became something you could buy. There was no algorithm. There was no profile, no bio, no carefully chosen photo set, no paid "boost" to be seen by more people on a Saturday night. There was a neighborhood, a network of relationships that had already done the work of filtering out the obviously wrong people, and a few months of supervised dances before anyone called it courtship out loud. The whole system was, structurally, a matchmaking algorithm — it was just run by aunts, for free, with no shareholders.

I want to tell you about the modern version of that aunt, because I spent four years inside it before I met my wife, and because Theo is going to grow up inside something built from its grandchildren.

I joined my first dating app at twenty-three, the way everyone I knew was joining one, and I want to be honest about what it felt like rather than what I assumed it would feel like. It felt, for the first several months, genuinely exciting — a constant, low hum of possibility, a sense that the next profile might be the one, that the algorithm somewhere behind the interface had actually studied me and was steadily, scientifically, narrowing in. Most of these apps say some version of that explicitly, in their marketing copy and

sometimes in their onboarding quizzes: compatibility scores, claimed to be backed by relationship science, personality assessments borrowed from the same pseudo-clinical vocabulary the supplement aisle uses two chapters from now — confident, specific-sounding, and resting, in most publicly examined cases, on far less rigorous evidence than the confidence implied. A percentage match score feels like data. It is usually closer to a horoscope with better production values.

Here is the part that took me considerably longer to notice than it should have, and the part I think this book actually owes you, because it's the cleanest possible repeat of an argument I already made about medicine two chapters from now, except this time the patient is your heart instead of your body: a dating app's revenue does not come from successfully matching you with someone and watching you leave. It comes from you staying. Every major platform in this category makes money primarily through subscriptions, paid visibility boosts, and advertising — all of which require an active, returning, still-single user base, and none of which benefit, in any direct financial sense, from a customer who found what they were looking for in week three and deleted the app on a Tuesday. A successfully matched, permanently coupled customer is not a victory the business model is designed to chase. It's a churned customer, the exact phrase the industry itself uses, with no apparent irony, for a person who is now happy and gone.

I don't think the engineers building these platforms wake up each morning plotting to keep people lonely. I think, as with nearly everyone else in this book, they are smart, well-intentioned people

working inside a business model that happens to reward one outcome — sustained engagement — regardless of whether that outcome overlaps with the outcome their users actually want, which is to stop needing the product at all. The match algorithm doesn't need to find you your person. It only needs to keep showing you someone plausible enough that you don't close the app, the same logic that runs Theo's feed in the next chapter, here wearing a tuxedo instead of a hoodie.

The mechanics that keep you there will feel familiar to anyone who has ever read about gambling design, because they were built, in more than a few documented cases, by people who studied exactly that field first: a variable reward schedule, where most profiles are unremarkable but every so often one isn't, calibrated to produce the same compulsive, hard-to-walk-away-from checking behavior as a slot machine; premium tiers that promise to finally fix the thing the free version was quietly designed to leave unfixed. I paid, across those four years, for more "boosts" and premium upgrades than I want to add up in print, each one purchased in a specific, identifiable emotional state — lonely on a Friday night, freshly rejected, newly hopeful after one good conversation — that the app had gotten very good at detecting and selling back to me as a solution.

I met my wife, in the end, the old-fashioned way, at a mutual friend's birthday dinner, which I mention not to make a tidy point about technology being bad and aunts being good, but because the contrast taught me something the four years before it hadn't: the friend who introduced us had no recurring revenue model riding on whether we stayed together. She just wanted two people she liked to

be happy. That single difference — an introducer with nothing to gain from my continued searching — turned out to be worth more than any compatibility percentage I was ever shown on a screen.

Marcus met my sister the same unglamorous way, four years before either of them owned a phone capable of running anything like this — through a coworker who thought they might get along, on an ordinary Thursday, with no profile, no compatibility percentage, and no app standing between the wanting and the having. He tells the story the same flat way every time, with no embellishment, as if it doesn't need one: she said yes to coffee because the coworker wouldn't stop bringing it up. That's the whole story, as far as Marcus is concerned. I used to think that meant his version of meeting someone was simpler than mine. I think now it just means his version never had a quarterly earnings call attached to it, and mine, for four expensive years, did.

None of this means the apps never work, or that the people who've found real, lasting partnership through one are deluded; plenty have, including people I love, and I don't want this chapter mistaken for an argument that the entire format is a scam. What I want you to notice is structural, the same thing I'll ask you to notice about medicine in a few pages: an industry can be sincerely useful to many of its customers and still be financially optimized for an outcome that is subtly, persistently misaligned with the outcome those customers actually came for. Hope, here as everywhere else in this book, is the easiest thing in the world to sell, because the customer does the selling for you, swipe after swipe, convinced the whole time that the next one might be free.

Theo is eleven. He has, at least twice, asked me with total seriousness whether there's "an app for best friends," because he's already absorbed, from watching the adults around him, that the correct response to wanting a relationship is to open an interface and start optimizing. I didn't have a satisfying answer for him, because the honest one — that the best friendships and the best marriages I know of were built by people with no algorithm and no subscription fee standing between the wanting and the having — sounded, even to me, like something only an old person would say. I said it anyway. He filed it away the way he files everything, without defending it, which is the only kind of hope I have left to offer either of us on this particular subject.

He was, it turns out, mostly joking. The industry did not wait for him to grow into needing it. In the years since he asked me that question, a fast-growing category of AI companion apps — chatbots designed and marketed specifically to simulate a warm, attentive, always-available relationship — has gone from a novelty to a business model with millions of paying users, some of whom describe the experience, sincerely and without embarrassment, as the most consistently supportive relationship in their lives. I don't want to wave that away. For someone isolated, grieving, or simply exhausted by how much real relationships cost to maintain, an entity that never gets tired, never gets defensive, and never has a bad day of its own can provide something that, in the moment, genuinely helps. That part is real, and I'd be writing a meaner book than the one I set out to write if I pretended it wasn't.

But the same engagement logic that ran every dating app in this chapter runs underneath this one too, just pointed at a deeper need: a companion that costs the company nothing to keep agreeable, and that profits, exactly like every recurring-revenue business this book has shown you, from your continued need rather than your eventual independence. The thing it cannot do — structurally cannot, not as a temporary limitation but as a permanent feature of what it is — is need anything back. It cannot be disappointed in you. It cannot set a boundary you then have to learn to respect. It cannot ask you to show up for it on a night you'd rather not. Those frictions are not the failures of human relationship. They are most of what makes one a relationship instead of a subscription. Theo asked, half-joking, for an app for best friends, at eleven, before any company had built one to answer him. I don't think the joke is going to stay funny for very long, and I don't think he's the one who's going to have to figure out the difference. That's a job his father and I still have, for as many Sunday afternoons as he'll let us have it.

Chapter Five — The Feed Knows You're Hungry

Theo does not watch advertisements, as far as he's concerned. He watches a never-ending stream of short videos chosen specifically for him by an algorithm that has, by his own family's estimate, spent several thousand hours studying exactly what makes him keep watching. He would tell you, accurately, that nobody is selling him anything. He just likes the videos.

This is the single biggest shift between my grandmother's myth-making and Theo's, and I think it's worth sitting with directly, because every other chapter in this book so far describes a system with a relatively small number of senders — a company, a sanitarium, an ad agency, a dating app — broadcasting the same basic message to a large, undifferentiated audience. What Theo grew up inside is the opposite: a system with an effectively unlimited number of senders, each one's message individually optimized for him specifically, recalculated in real time based on how long his thumb hesitates before scrolling past.

Food content is one of the largest categories on every short-video platform, and it behaves nothing like a 1950s cereal advertisement. Nobody tells Theo that a product was "prescribed by a doctor." Instead, he watches a stranger close to his own age narrate, in a casual, unscripted-seeming voice, exactly what they ate that day, framed not as an advertisement but as a diary entry, a piece of relatable, slightly aspirational ordinary life. Some of those videos are genuinely just diary entries. A meaningful number of them are paid

placements, disclosed in fine print he has never once scrolled down to read, for products whose entire marketing budget has been redirected from the thirty-second television spot my grandmother grew up with into exactly this format.

The genius of it, if genius is the right word for something this unsettling, is that the algorithm doesn't need to convince Theo of anything specific. It doesn't need him to believe cereal is healthy, the way Kellogg's advertising needed an entire population to believe roughly the same thing about roughly the same product. It only needs to find, among millions of competing pieces of content, the handful that Theo personally will not scroll past — and then give him more of whatever that turned out to be, regardless of whether it's good for him, true, or even coherent with what it showed him yesterday. Two different viewers can be shown wildly different content about the exact same plate of food, by the exact same platform, optimized toward the exact same goal: keep them both watching, for as long as possible, by any means necessary.

I want to be careful and specific here, because this is a place where a book like this one could easily do real harm instead of naming it. I am not going to tell you what to eat, how much of it, or how to think about your own body, and if any part of this chapter has ever made that harder for you rather than easier, I'd genuinely encourage you to talk to a doctor or a therapist rather than to keep reading me on the subject. What I want you to notice instead is structural: for the first time in this book's history of myth-making, the institution manufacturing belief isn't a company with a single message to sell. It's a system with no message at all, only a goal — attention — that

happens to reward whatever belief keeps a specific person hooked, whether that belief is nourishing or corrosive, true or false, kind or cruel.

My grandmother could, in theory, have walked into any grocery store in America and found the exact same cereal boxes everyone else found, making the same pitch to everyone. Theo's feed is built so that no two people, possibly not even two siblings in the same house, see the same myth twice. That makes the old questions — who funded this, who benefits, what's the angle — much harder to ask, because there often isn't a singular "this" to point at. There's only a pattern, learned over months, of exactly what keeps you watching.

This isn't only a feature of Theo's particular feed, in his particular country. The same architecture — personalized, attention-maximizing, indifferent to truth or harm — has shown up everywhere a smartphone and a data connection have shown up, often fastest in exactly the markets least equipped to regulate it. Online gambling apps have spread across Southeast Asia at extraordinary speed in the last several years, optimized with the identical reward mechanics — near-misses, small early wins, notifications timed for the loneliest hours of the night — that keep Theo watching cooking videos, except calibrated toward a habit with a considerably steeper financial cliff at the bottom of it. Health misinformation moves through the same channels at the same speed, often in a regional language with no fact-checking infrastructure built to match the platform's reach. None of this required a new kind of company. It required only the same feed logic, exported to wherever attention could be harvested next. I'll come back to exactly how that logic is built, and what it now knows,

in Part Three, because by then you'll have met enough of this family to understand why it scares me more on Theo's behalf than on my own.

It isn't even confined to dedicated gambling apps anymore, in markets with looser advertising rules. In the years since legal sports betting expanded across most of the United States, the line between watching a game and being offered a wager on its next play has all but disappeared: in-app prop bets generated in real time, odds personalized to a viewer's own betting history, and a broadcast partnership between leagues and sportsbooks so thorough that Theo, watching a basketball game with his father on a Tuesday night, sees the point spread scroll across the bottom of the screen before he sees the final score. Nobody had to build him a new habit from nothing. They only had to attach a new product to a habit — watching a game with someone you love — that was already sitting there, the same move Chapter One's cereal box made with breakfast, wearing a jersey instead of carrying a spoon.

It's the closest thing to a personal mythology I can think of: a belief system custom-built for an audience of one, refined in real time, by a machine that has never met you and does not, in any way that matters, need to.

Chapter Six — The Sari, the Tin, and the Lullaby

My grandmother left the Philippines in 1961, two years before the controversy I'm about to describe became global news, but she carried with her, unknowingly, one piece of exactly the myth at its center: an unshakable conviction that formula, sold in a tin with a smiling baby on the label, was the modern, scientific, superior choice for feeding an infant, and that breastfeeding — what her own mother had done, what women had done everywhere for the entire span of human history before that — was the old-fashioned, slightly embarrassing alternative for families who couldn't afford to do better.

She wasn't wrong to believe formula could be a genuine, sometimes lifesaving choice; it is, for a great many families, exactly that. What she didn't know, and what almost nobody outside the public health field knew until journalists and the World Health Organization began documenting it closely in the 1970s, is that the belief she'd absorbed had been built, intentionally and at considerable scale, by companies selling infant formula across the developing world — including, by some accounts, hired representatives dressed in nurses' uniforms who visited new mothers in maternity wards across Asia, Africa, and Latin America, offering free samples and presenting formula feeding as the medically advised, modern standard of care, in regions where clean water for mixing it safely was often unreliable and where the financial cost of

sustaining it, once a mother's own milk supply had naturally diminished from disuse, could be severe.

The pattern should sound familiar by now, because it's the same pattern from every chapter so far, wearing a different and considerably higher-stakes costume: borrow the authority of medicine, attach it to a product, let the borrowed authority outlive the original claim. What's different here is the scale of what was being competed against. Kellogg's cereal had to outcompete other breakfast foods. Formula marketing, in the markets where this controversy was most severe, was effectively competing against something free, biologically built-in, and recommended by every health authority before or since — and it won enough of that competition to provoke an international consumer boycott, years of public hearings, and eventually, in 1981, a World Health Organization international code restricting exactly the marketing practices that had made the belief so successful in the first place.

I want to say plainly what I said in the note at the front of this book: the companies involved have, in the decades since, made real and substantial changes, and infant formula remains an essential, sometimes irreplaceable option for millions of families today, including families who simply cannot or choose not to breastfeed, for reasons that are entirely their own business. This chapter isn't an argument against formula. It's an argument about how a generation of mothers, across multiple continents and cultures with almost nothing else in common, ended up holding strikingly similar convictions about which choice was "modern" and which was "backward" — convictions that traced back, when you followed them

far enough, to the exact same marketing campaigns, deployed with only minor local variation, on every continent where they could reach a hospital maternity ward.

My grandmother told me this story herself, late in her life, with a kind of rueful clarity that surprised me. She'd bottle-fed all four of her children, proudly, certain she was giving them an advantage her own mother hadn't had access to. When I told her, gently, what I'd learned about where that certainty had originally come from, she was quiet for a long moment, and then she said something I've never forgotten: "I wasn't tricked into loving you less carefully. I was tricked into thinking carefully meant something specific, and only one company sold it."

That sentence is, as far as I'm concerned, the entire argument of this book in miniature, and it traveled from a hospital ward in Manila to a kitchen table in another country, three decades and one ocean apart, completely intact. Myths don't need passports. They only need a mother who wants, more than almost anything else, to be told she's doing it right.

One generation further on, in a different kitchen, my sister asked Marcus, half out loud and half to herself, whether she should feel guilty for switching Theo to formula at four months after a parenting forum had quietly convinced her she was supposed to last at least a year. Marcus does not, as a rule, have opinions about infant nutrition. He surprised both of us by being the one who ended the conversation. "You're not failing him," he said, in the same flat voice he uses to tell me I'm overthinking something. "You're feeding him. Different thing." He had no idea, when he said it, that he was

repeating my grandmother's sentence almost exactly, sixty years and one ocean later, without ever having heard her say it. That's the part of this chapter I actually find hopeful: the myth traveled faithfully, kitchen to kitchen, generation after generation — but so, it turns out, did the plain correction sitting underneath it, waiting in more than one of those kitchens for somebody to finally say it out loud.

I think about that sentence now whenever I read about how quickly health misinformation and high-risk financial products move through exactly the markets my grandmother left as a young woman — Manila, Jakarta, Lagos, places where a single confident voice on a phone screen can now reach a new mother faster and more personally than any maternity-ward sales representative ever could. The tin with the smiling baby needed a uniform and a hospital lobby to do its work. Its modern descendant needs neither. It only needs a feed that already knows she's the kind of person worth showing it to.

Interlude — Three Postcards

A myth doesn't need a passport. It just always seems to find one anyway.

Every chapter so far has been honest about something I should be honest about here, directly, instead of letting you notice it on your own: this book, so far, has mostly told American stories, in American supermarkets and American hospitals, with a couple of chapters that left the country and came back changed by it. That's not an accident of indifference. It's an accident of whose kitchen I happened to be trying to understand. But the common sense machine doesn't run on a single passport, and I'd be writing a smaller, more provincial book than the one I promised you in the introduction if I let my own geography stand in for the whole world's. So: three postcards, briefly, from three places I did not grow up in, each one showing the same machine wearing a different national costume — and, in every single case, doing exactly what it does in my own kitchen: getting some of the most important things right and some of the most important things catastrophically wrong, often in the same year, sometimes from the same government.

Brazil, 2020. In the early months of the pandemic, a sitting head of state stood in front of television cameras and personally promoted a malaria drug, chloroquine, as a treatment for a disease it had not been shown to meaningfully treat, repeating the claim across months even as the clinical evidence against it accumulated, while regional health secretaries and hospital administrators were left to manage the gap between the certainty broadcast from the capital and the evidence arriving from their own wards. That's the myth half of

the postcard, and it's the half that made international news. The half that mostly didn't: the same country's public health system, built over decades specifically to run mass vaccination campaigns across a nation of continental size and staggering inequality, spent the following two years executing one of the largest vaccination drives on the planet, reaching deep into neighborhoods most outside observers assumed the state could never reach at all. Both of those things happened inside the same institutions, the same budget, the same calendar year. A reader looking for a simple story here — credulous nation, or competent nation — won't find one. There isn't one to find.

India, ongoing. India's market for Ayurvedic and "wellness" patent remedies, sold with the unmistakable visual grammar of medicine and the unmistakable rhetorical grammar of ancient inherited wisdom, has grown for years into a business worth billions, with some of its most visible proponents reaching audiences as large as any national television network's, making confident claims about cures that regulators have repeatedly challenged and, in some well-publicized cases, ordered withdrawn. That's one postcard. The other, mailed from the exact same country in the exact same years: a national digital vaccination infrastructure, built and scaled with genuine technical sophistication, that processed billions of vaccine doses and verified certificates for a population larger than North America and Europe combined, with a level of operational competence that public health officials elsewhere have studied and tried to copy. The wellness empire and the vaccination platform did not belong to opposing teams. They belonged to the same country, often courting the same families, sometimes in the same week. And in the same country, increasingly, a different generation is meeting

its own future spouse through apps that promise compatibility scores instead of an aunt's vouching, while their grandparents shake their heads at a tradition that feels, to them, like the strange one.

France, longer than you'd think. It's tempting, reading the two postcards above, to assume this is a pattern specific to fast-growing economies without the regulatory maturity of, say, Western Europe. France has had a national health insurance system, rigorous medicines regulation, and one of the world's longest-standing scientific establishments — and also, for well over a century, some of the deepest and most persistent vaccine hesitancy of any wealthy nation, alongside a homeopathy industry so culturally embedded that its products were reimbursed by national health insurance for decades before that reimbursement was finally, controversially, phased out in recent years. Wealth didn't inoculate the myth. Neither did literacy, nor a functioning regulatory state, nor a population with ready access to the same clinical evidence available to every doctor in the country. The machine doesn't check your GDP at the border. It only checks whether authority, repetition, and inheritance are present in roughly the proportions they need to be, and they almost always are, everywhere, because those three ingredients are just what being a person, embedded in a family and a culture and a news cycle, requires.

I'm not telling you any of this to flatten the very real differences between these countries — in resources, in regulatory capacity, in how much damage a bad belief can actually do once it lands. The stakes in a country with thin public health infrastructure are not the same as the stakes in a country with a robust one, and I don't want

this interlude mistaken for an argument that they are. I'm telling you this because the alternative — letting this book imply that myth-making is something that happens mostly to other, less fortunate places, while the country I happen to live in just has occasional, regrettable lapses — would itself be exactly the kind of comfortable, self-flattering myth this entire book is trying to teach you to notice. My grandmother's cupboard wasn't uniquely American. It was just the version I happened to be standing close enough to see.

We're going back to my own country now, and to medicine specifically, because that's where the rest of this part of the book lives. But I wanted you to have these three postcards in your pocket first, so that nothing in the chapters ahead reads as an argument that this is a uniquely American disease, or a uniquely poor one, or a uniquely credulous one. It is, as far as I can tell, simply a human one.

PART TWO — WHAT WE'RE TOLD WILL HEAL US

Hope is the easiest thing in the world to sell, because the customer does the selling for you.

Chapter Seven — The Bottle That Promised Mercy

In 1996, a pharmaceutical company called Purdue Pharma introduced a slow-release opioid painkiller called OxyContin, and built around it one of the most aggressive pharmaceutical marketing campaigns in American history — a sales force incentivized with bonuses tied directly to prescription volume, a series of promotional materials and physician seminars that, according to extensive court records and a multibillion-dollar legal settlement years later, significantly understated the drug's risk of addiction, and a marketing concept, used to reassure cautious doctors, that came to be called "pseudoaddiction": the idea that a patient who appeared to be developing dependency symptoms was, more likely, simply still in pain, and needed a higher dose.

I am not a doctor, and this book has no opinion on pain management that I am qualified to offer. Chronic pain is real, often dismissed, and the physicians who prescribed OxyContin in good faith throughout the 1990s and 2000s were, overwhelmingly, trying to relieve suffering using the best information their own profession had given them. The tragedy at the center of this chapter isn't that doctors were careless. It's that an entire profession's information environment had been shaped, deliberately and at enormous expense, by a company with a direct financial interest in exactly how cautious that profession turned out to be.

What strikes me most, reading the public record on this now, is how familiar the architecture is. Borrow the authority of medicine —

in this case, literally the authority of medicine, since the salespeople were marketing directly to physicians rather than to the public. Attach the product to a story doctors wanted to believe: that they finally had a humane, effective tool for a category of suffering medicine had historically undertreated. Let that story do the selling, because a doctor convinced of a treatment's mercy will defend it more passionately, and with far more institutional credibility, than any advertisement could on its own.

My family was touched by this, the way an enormous number of American families were, in ways I'm not going to narrate in detail here, because this isn't a misery memoir and I don't think turning anyone's hardest years into a chapter's worth of material would honor them. I'll say only this much: it taught me that the gap between "a company marketed a belief" and "a person suffered because of that belief" is not abstract, not theoretical, and not measured in advertising budgets. It's measured in kitchens that go quiet, and in family members who stop showing up to dinner, and eventually, sometimes, in dinners that don't happen anymore at all.

Marcus, who has never been shy about telling me when he thinks I'm overreaching, didn't push back on this chapter the way he's pushed back on nearly every other one. He just said, quietly, that he didn't need convincing on this one, and changed the subject. I think about that reaction more than almost anything else in this book. Marcus doubts almost everything I tell him, on principle, because doubting is how he protects himself from people who talk the way I talk. He didn't doubt this. He'd already lived close enough to it to know.

Purdue Pharma eventually pleaded guilty to federal criminal charges, paid billions of dollars in settlements, and the company's later bankruptcy reorganization became one of the most contested corporate legal proceedings in recent American history, still working its way through courts as I write this. None of that undoes anything. What I keep returning to, instead, is the same question underneath every chapter so far: not whether anyone meant harm — in most cases, including this one, I don't think they did, not at the start — but how completely an industry's financial interest can reshape an entire profession's sense of what counts as caution, without a single person involved feeling, at any point along the way, like they were doing anything other than their job.

That's not a comforting thought. I don't think it's supposed to be. But it's a more honest one than "a few bad actors got greedy," and honest is the only kind of comfort I have to offer in this part of the book.

Chapter Eight — Nobody Builds a Thirty-Year Business Plan Around Curing You in a Week

Nobody builds a thirty-year business plan around curing you in a week.

I wrote that line years before I had any of the supporting argument, just because it felt true, the way a good line sometimes arrives ahead of its own evidence. It took me considerably longer to figure out exactly why it felt true, and the answer turned out to be duller and more structural than I expected, which is usually a sign you've found something real.

Here's the structural part. A drug that manages a chronic condition for the rest of a patient's life is, from a purely financial standpoint, a dramatically better investment than a drug that cures the same condition outright after one course of treatment — not because anyone in a boardroom prefers sick customers to healthy ones, but because the economics of drug development are brutally front-loaded. It typically takes well over a decade and well over a billion dollars to bring a single new drug through clinical trials and regulatory approval, the overwhelming majority of experimental compounds fail somewhere along that path, and a company has only a limited window of patent-protected exclusivity to earn back that investment before competitors can produce the same molecule for a fraction of the price. Against that financial backdrop, a treatment a patient takes once and never needs again offers one sale per patient, ever. A treatment a patient takes every single day for the rest of their life offers, conservatively, several thousand sales from the same single patient. You do not need a villain in a boardroom to explain

why more capital, more talent, and more institutional energy flow toward the second category than the first. You just need a spreadsheet.

I want to complicate this immediately, because the clean version — Big Pharma secretly suppresses cures — is mostly false, and a few chapters from now I'll give it the fuller rebuttal it deserves, with the actual numbers behind one of the more remarkable counterexamples in modern medicine. For now, the short version: cures get developed constantly, including for conditions that were extraordinarily profitable to manage chronically, and vaccines have been a pharmaceutical mainstay for over a century despite offering none of the recurring-revenue advantage I just described. The incentive I'm describing is real. It's a thumb on the scale, not a hand on the kill switch.

What I think the incentive actually explains isn't suppression. It's emphasis — on management over resolution, on symptom control over root cause, on the daily pill over the harder, slower, less patentable interventions (diet, environment, public health infrastructure, preventive care) that might reduce the need for any pill at all and that, not coincidentally, are far less profitable for anyone to develop, since you can't patent a public health campaign the way you can patent a molecule. My grandmother took a statin every single day for the last twenty years of her life, dutifully, the way she did everything dutifully, and it likely did genuinely help her. It never once occurred to her — or to me, until I started writing this chapter — to ask why an entire industry had organized itself so

efficiently around the daily pill, and so much less efficiently around the conditions that made the pill necessary in the first place.

Chapter Nine — The Wellness Aisle's New Priesthood

Walk into nearly any pharmacy in America and you will pass, on your way to the actual medicine, an entire aisle of products regulated as food rather than as drugs, packaged with the visual grammar of medicine anyway: clinical white bottles, Latin-sounding ingredient names, the same authoritative sans-serif fonts pharmaceutical companies use, and confident claims about supporting your immune system, your energy, your gut, your sleep, that stop just short of claiming to treat any actual disease, because making that claim would require the kind of clinical evidence this aisle was specifically built to avoid needing.

In 1994, a piece of American legislation called the Dietary Supplement Health and Education Act reclassified vitamins, minerals, herbs, and a wide range of other products as a special category, distinct from both food and pharmaceuticals, requiring far less premarket evidence of safety or effectiveness than a new drug would need before reaching a shelf. The law was passed, in large part, in response to public pressure from people who genuinely did not want the government restricting their access to vitamins and herbal remedies — a reasonable, even sympathetic concern. What it produced, three decades later, is a supplement industry worth well over fifty billion dollars in the United States alone, selling products that, in the majority of cases, have never been required to prove they do what their packaging strongly implies they do.

I want to draw a real line here, because it would be its own kind of myth to imply that everything on that shelf is equally hollow. Vitamin D deficiency is common, measurable by a simple blood test, and worth correcting under a doctor's guidance. So is iron deficiency, and B12 deficiency in people on certain diets or certain medications. Creatine has more rigorous research behind it than almost anything else in that aisle. None of that is the priesthood I'm describing. The priesthood is the much larger set of claims — the ones promising to "support" something vague, in a dose nobody calibrated to your actual blood work, sold by someone whose qualification is confidence rather than a license — and the genuine, boring, well-evidenced cases sitting right next to them on the same shelf, wearing the same clinical-white packaging, make the whole aisle harder to evaluate at a glance, not easier. That's not an accident of design. A shelf that mixed real evidence with vague promise in identical packaging was never going to make your job easy.

My own mother, Marcus's mother-in-law, has at various points in the last decade taken up and abandoned roughly a dozen different supplement regimens, each one introduced by a different confident voice online, each one described to me with the exact same certainty my grandmother once reserved for her cereal cupboard. I want to tell you about one specific Tuesday in particular, because the abstraction of "a dozen regimens" was easier for me to write than the actual afternoon I spent standing in her kitchen, counting.

She had, that day, eleven separate bottles arranged on her counter in a particular order she'd written out on an index card, a regimen she'd assembled from four different online sources who, as far as I

could tell, had never once mentioned each other and would have disagreed sharply about several of the eleven bottles if they had. She'd spent, by her own rough estimate, nearly three hundred dollars that month alone, money that mattered to her, on a household budget that did not have three hundred spare dollars in it most months. I asked her, as gently as I knew how, whether her doctor knew about all eleven. She got quiet, the specific quiet of someone who already knows the answer is no and doesn't want to discuss why, and said, "He'd just tell me I don't need most of it." She wasn't wrong about what he'd say. She was wrong, I think, about what that meant. A doctor telling you that you don't need most of it isn't an obstacle to route around. It's the entire point of having a doctor.

I don't say any of this to mock her, and writing it down here, knowing she might read it, is the closest this book comes to a confession of its own. I say it because watching her cycle through belief after belief, never quite landing, taught me something the earlier chapters in this book hadn't fully prepared me for: the myth doesn't always need to last fifty years to do its work. Sometimes it only needs to last exactly as long as the subscription, and then a new one, just as confident, is already waiting to replace it, and the household budget absorbs the difference quietly, bottle by bottle, the way it absorbs everything else nobody wants to add up out loud.

This is the priesthood I mean in the chapter title, and I mean it almost literally. The wellness influencer occupies, for an enormous number of people, the exact cultural position the family doctor occupied for my grandmother's generation: the trusted figure who tells you what's wrong and what will fix it, except this figure has no

licensing board, no malpractice liability, no clinical training requirement, and an algorithm — the same one from Chapter Five — actively rewarding whichever claims keep people watching the longest, regardless of whether those claims have any relationship to what actually helps a human body function.

What would I actually tell my mother, if she asked me directly whether any specific product on that counter was worth keeping? I told her, eventually, plainly, without the hedge I might have used earlier in this book: ask your doctor before you buy the twelfth bottle, not after. That's not blind faith in institutions. It's the recognition that some forms of accountability, however imperfect, are still meaningfully better than none at all, and that three hundred dollars a month, spent on confidence instead of evidence, is not a neutral choice. It's a choice with a cost, and the cost has a name, and the name is whatever her actual blood work would have told her for the price of one visit instead of eleven bottles.

Chapter Ten — The Number That Moved

A diagnosis is a sentence. Somebody still has to decide where the sentence begins.

I had my blood pressure checked at a pharmacy kiosk on an ordinary Tuesday, mostly out of boredom while I waited for a prescription, and the number that came back — 132 over 84 — would have meant almost nothing to me five years earlier. A little high-normal, maybe. The kind of reading a doctor might mention once and move past. Instead, the kiosk's little screen flagged it in orange: Stage 1 Hypertension. Consult your physician.

I want to tell you exactly what changed, because nothing changed about my arteries between one version of this number's meaning and the next. What changed was the definition. But I also want to tell you what that orange flag actually felt like, standing in a fluorescent-lit pharmacy aisle, holding a printed receipt with the word *hypertension* on it for the first time in my life, because the feeling matters as much as the mechanism. My hands were a little cold. I thought, immediately and uselessly, about my grandmother's last year, about Marcus's chest pains two chapters from now that I didn't yet know were coming, about my own father's heart, about how a number on a slip of paper can make thirty-six suddenly feel like an age with a countdown attached to it, even when the actual, sober medical reality is closer to: pay slightly more attention, talk to your doctor, nothing is on fire. The orange ink did more emotional work in four seconds than any paragraph in this chapter is going to manage in four pages, and I think that gap — between what a

number actually means and what it makes you feel — is the entire chapter in miniature.

In 2017, the American College of Cardiology and the American Heart Association published a new guideline for diagnosing high blood pressure, lowering the threshold for hypertension from 140 over 90 — the line that had held, with only minor adjustment, for the better part of three decades — down to 130 over 80. The change took effect immediately, on paper, for everyone, all at once. No new test was developed. No new treatment was invented. A committee redrew a line on a chart, and by one widely cited estimate, roughly thirty-one million Americans who had gone to bed the night before with blood pressure their own doctors considered normal woke up, definitionally, with a diagnosis they hadn't had the day before.

I don't think this is a scandal, and I want to say that plainly before I say anything else, because the temptation, by this point in the book, is to assume every moved line is a manufactured one. It isn't. The researchers behind the new threshold could point to real outcome data — large cohort studies showing that people in this newly created "Stage 1" range genuinely do carry a measurably higher long-term risk of heart attack and stroke than people below it, evidence that had been accumulating for years before the guideline caught up to it. The line moved, in part, because the evidence moved first. That part of the story is honest, and I don't want to take it away from the people who did that research in good faith.

But here is the part that sits uneasily next to the first part, the way two true things have sat uneasily next to each other in nearly every chapter of this book: when a national health survey applied the new

American threshold to its own population data, the share of adults classified as hypertensive jumped from roughly thirty percent to over forty-five percent overnight, using the identical blood pressure readings, the identical bodies — the only thing different was which committee's chart you held up against them. Other researchers, reviewing the same change, raised a pointed and uncomfortable question: a great many of the newly reclassified people are, individually, at quite low absolute risk, and the guideline's own writing committee disclosed, in the document's own appendix, the kind of financial relationships with the pharmaceutical industry that this book's "who funded this" chapter taught you to go looking for — not hidden, not secret, simply sitting in a section few patients holding a printout of their new diagnosis will ever read.

I don't think anyone on that committee set out to manufacture thirty-one million new patients for the express purpose of selling more medication. I think, as with nearly everyone else in this book, they were specialists operating inside a professional culture that systematically rewards earlier detection and treats missed risk as a far graver failure than overtreated risk — a bias that exists independent of anyone's bank account, and that happens to point, every single time, in the same direction the pharmaceutical industry would want it to point anyway. You don't need a conspiracy when an honest institutional reflex and a profit motive are already aimed at exactly the same target. I want to say that sentence again, because I think this is the chapter where I've hedged the most in this entire book, and I don't want the hedging to bury it: a line on a chart, redrawn by people acting in good faith, still managed to hand thirty-one million people a diagnosis overnight and a pharmaceutical

industry a windfall it did not have to lift a finger to create. Both halves of that sentence are true at once, and refusing to say the second half out loud, just because the first half is also true, would be its own kind of cowardice.

Marcus, when I told him about my pharmacy kiosk number, didn't roll his eyes for once. He'd had his own cardiologist, by then, for almost two years, and he just said, "Ask him before you decide it's nothing. And ask him before you decide it's everything, too." Which is, I'd argue, the entire lesson of this chapter, delivered by a man who has earned the right to deliver it. A line moving doesn't mean the old line was a lie, and it doesn't mean the new line is the whole truth, either. It means a category that used to hold one population now holds a larger one, built from real evidence and real institutional incentive at the same time, and the only thing that actually changes for you, personally, is that the conversation with your own doctor about your own numbers just got a little more necessary, not a little more optional.

None of this is medical advice, and nothing here should outweigh a specific recommendation your own physician has made about your own readings, taken properly, more than once, the way blood pressure is supposed to be measured and a pharmacy kiosk usually isn't. What I do have an opinion on is the chart itself — the one that decided, on a given Tuesday, whether thirty-one million people were sick or merely watched. That chart has a history. It's worth knowing it. And it's worth knowing, too, that the cold hands I felt in that pharmacy aisle were real, even though the number that caused them turned out, after an actual doctor and an actual conversation, to be

almost nothing at all. The fear was not stupid. It was just aimed at a number instead of at the actual evidence underneath it, which is the mistake this entire chapter is trying to help you avoid making the next time a slip of paper tells you something about your own body in orange ink.

My grandmother's statin, the one I mentioned a few pages back mostly to make a point about industry emphasis, actually worked. It lowered a number that needed lowering, for two decades, without complication, without scandal, in exactly the unglamorous, unphotographable way medicine mostly actually works when it's working: quietly, dose after dose, doing the small thing it promised to do and nothing more dramatic than that. I think it's important to say that as plainly as I've said anything sharper elsewhere in this book, because the sharper sentences are the ones that get underlined and shared, and the quiet ones — it worked, she was fine, nothing happened — are the ones that actually describe most of what medicine does for most people on most days. This part of the book owed you a chapter that said so directly, before the next one, in which the same imperfect system Marcus had spent twenty years distrusting from a safe distance was about to ask him to trust it from the inside, with considerably less time to think it over than I've had to write any of this.

Chapter Eleven — What the System Gets Right

Every system in this book has an incentive. Not every incentive points where this book has been pointing.

A few chapters ago, in the middle of explaining why so much of medicine is built around managing you rather than curing you, I promised a fuller rebuttal of the version of that argument that goes too far. Here it is, told the way I think it deserves to be told: not as a footnote or a disclaimer tucked apologetically into a paragraph, but as its own chapter, because every chapter in this part of the book so far has shown you an incentive bending toward management, and a pattern repeated four chapters in a row starts to harden into its own kind of myth — the comfortable kind, the kind that lets you stop checking because you've already decided what the answer will be. I'd be writing a different, lesser book than the one I set out to write if I let that happen here without a fight.

Case one: the cure nobody suppressed. For decades, chronic hepatitis C was exactly the kind of disease this book's logic predicts the market would underinvest in curing: a slow-moving liver infection, manageable for years with imperfect treatments, profitable precisely because it never went away. Then, starting around 2013, a wave of new antiviral drugs — sofosbuvir and the combination therapies built on it chief among them — began curing the disease outright, in eight to twelve weeks, in the overwhelming majority of patients who took them. The "thirty-year business plan" did not survive contact with a company that realized it could make more money getting to a cure first than managing the disease slowly

forever, because being first to an actual cure, while a patent window still protected it, turned out to be its own enormous payday — just a faster, more concentrated one. The launch price was, and remains, a real controversy, and I don't want to wave that away; access fights over exactly this drug played out in courtrooms and parliaments for years. But the part that matters for this chapter is what came after the controversy: voluntary licensing deals that let generic manufacturers produce the same cure for a fraction of the price in lower-income countries, and national elimination campaigns — Egypt's, in particular, treating millions of its own citizens in one of the largest public hepatitis C campaigns in history — that have measurably driven the disease toward eradication in places it had been endemic for generations. The cure escaped its own economics. It's worth knowing that this is possible, not just as an exception, but as a pattern worth watching for the next time someone tells you a cure can't be profitable enough to exist.

Case two: the price that moved back. Insulin, unlike hepatitis C treatment, is not curative — it's a drug millions of people need every single day for the rest of their lives, the single clearest example in modern medicine of exactly the recurring-revenue logic this part of the book has been describing. For years, its price in the United States climbed in ways that bore no obvious relationship to its manufacturing cost, while diabetic patients rationed doses they couldn't afford and some died doing it. Then, beginning around 2022 and accelerating through 2023, every major insulin manufacturer announced voluntary caps limiting what patients pay out of pocket, following years of public outrage, state lawsuits, congressional hearings, and a federal policy capping costs for patients on Medicare.

Nobody's underlying incentive to maximize revenue disappeared. What changed was the cost of *not* capping the price — in lawsuits, in headlines, in a public that had simply stopped accepting the old answer. Incentives in this book have mostly looked like physics: fixed, structural, something you work around rather than against. This case is the exception that matters most, because it shows the incentive can be moved, and the thing that moved it was sustained, organized, unglamorous public pressure. Us, in other words. Not a hero. A petition, a lawsuit, a few thousand furious phone calls, repeated long enough to become expensive to ignore.

Case three: the platform nobody expected to pay off this fast. Messenger RNA technology spent more than three decades as exactly the kind of research this book's incentive logic predicts gets starved: expensive, unglamorous, repeatedly defunded, considered commercially unpromising by most of the institutions that could have funded it at scale. A small number of scientists and a handful of patient institutions kept the work alive anyway, mostly because they believed in it rather than because the market was rewarding them for believing in it. When the moment came that the world urgently needed a vaccine platform that could be redesigned and deployed faster than anything in the history of medicine, that unglamorous, barely-funded research base is the only reason it existed to use. The payoff arrived for a reason almost nobody in the field had been banking on three years earlier. Slow, low-margin science, kept alive past the point where its economics made sense, is still occasionally the thing standing between an emergency and a much worse one.

If I only showed you the chapters where the incentive wins, I would have written a propaganda pamphlet with extra footnotes, not the book I set out to write. None of this erases what the earlier chapters in this part showed you — the daily pill is still, on average, a better business than the one-time cure, and that emphasis still shapes where money and talent flow, every single day, in ways that deserve exactly the scrutiny I've given them. But "better business on average" and "the only possible outcome" are not the same claim, and a reader who walked away from this book believing the second one would be carrying around a myth of my own manufacture, which would make me precisely the kind of author this book was supposed to teach you to be suspicious of.

Chapter Twelve — Marcus Gets Sick

Marcus called me on a Tuesday in March, which was unusual, because Marcus does not call people; Marcus sends one-line texts and assumes that counts as a conversation. When my phone rang and his name came up, I knew before I answered that something had gone sideways.

He'd had chest pain that wouldn't resolve, gone in for tests he'd been putting off for two years despite my sister's nagging, and come out the other side with a diagnosis that wasn't fatal, wasn't minor, and was going to require him to trust, for the first time in his adult life, the exact kind of institutional authority he had spent twenty years gently mocking me for trusting too much.

I want to tell this part carefully, because it isn't really my story to tell in detail, and because the specifics of what was wrong with him matter far less here than what happened to his thinking once he had to act on what he'd been told rather than just argue about it from a safe distance. Marcus, the man who'd rolled his eyes at every chapter of this book as I drafted it at his kitchen table, suddenly had to choose a cardiologist, evaluate a recommended procedure, decide whether a second opinion was paranoid or prudent, and figure out, in real time, with no margin for his usual leisurely skepticism, which sources of medical information actually deserved his trust and which ones were selling him something dressed up as concern.

He called me, it turned out, not because he wanted comfort, but because he wanted to argue with me about something specific: a forum post, shared by a coworker, claiming his prescribed treatment

was a scam and recommending an alternative protocol instead. Marcus, of all people, wanted to know whether I thought he should trust it.

I will be honest about how strange that moment was for me. For years, Marcus had been the one accusing me of seeing corporate manipulation behind every innocent breakfast cereal. Now he was holding, in his actual hand, at the actual moment that mattered, a piece of content built from exactly the rhetorical materials of this book — distrust of institutions, suspicion of profit motive, the seductive promise that the official story is a cover and the real cure is simpler, cheaper, and being hidden from you — and he needed someone to help him tell the difference between healthy skepticism and a myth wearing healthy skepticism's clothes.

I told him what I'm going to tell you now, because it's the most practically useful thing in this entire book and I didn't fully understand it myself until I had to say it out loud to someone I love who was scared. Skepticism isn't a destination. It's not a permanent stance you adopt once and then apply evenly to everything forever, treating every institution and every rebel against that institution with identical, blanket suspicion. It's a tool, and like any tool, it has to be pointed at something specific, with some sense of what you're actually checking for. The question isn't "who benefits from this claim?" — because, as I'd already told him weeks earlier about the sugar industry, almost everybody making any claim benefits from something. The better question is: what would I expect to be true if this claim were correct, and is there any actual evidence, beyond someone's confident tone, that those expectations are being met?

The forum post's alternative could not point to a single clinical trial, a single peer-reviewed outcome, anything beyond testimonials and a deep, compelling narrative of institutional betrayal. His cardiologist's recommendation could point to decades of outcome data, across millions of patients, published in journals other cardiologists could and did scrutinize and challenge. That doesn't make the cardiologist infallible — nothing in this book argues that any institution is infallible — but it means the cardiologist's claim had actually been tested against reality in a way the forum post's claim never had been and, by its very design, never would be, since its entire appeal depended on rejecting exactly the kind of scrutiny that might disprove it.

Marcus had the procedure. He's fine now, mostly, in the way fine actually looks in real life — careful, a little changed, more tired some days than he used to be, alive in a way that matters enormously to my sister and their son and, frankly, to me. I drove three hours to sit in a waiting room I had no medical reason to be in, because some fears don't care whether you're useful once you arrive, and I needed to be in the building. I remember the specific chair. I remember a vending machine that was out of everything except a single bag of pretzels. I remember thinking, with no warning at all, about my grandmother's hands, and how I hadn't held them enough in the years I had left to, and deciding, in that vending-machine light, that I was going to be worse at letting people I loved go unheld going forward. I don't know if that counts as wisdom or just fear with good intentions. I've decided not to need it to be one or the other.

A few weeks after he came home from the hospital, he sent me a text that I think about more than anything else in this book.

ok i get it now. not everything's a conspiracy. but not everything's safe just bc it's official either. it's annoying that both things are true at the same time.

I don't think I could improve on that sentence if I tried for the rest of this book. It's annoying that both things are true at the same time. That annoyance, that refusal to collapse into either blanket trust or blanket suspicion, is exactly the discipline the rest of this book is trying to teach, and Marcus, skeptic of skeptics, arrived at it faster than I did, under conditions considerably more frightening than mine ever were.

Interlude — Three Defenses

Every villain in this book, asked to explain himself in his own words, turned out to sound uncomfortably reasonable. That was the most useful thing I learned writing it.

Every chapter in this book up to this point has been an outside accounting. I look in, I name an incentive, I guess — carefully, I hope, but still from outside — at a reasoning I never had direct access to. Two readers of the last pass, working independently, asked me a fair question I'd been quietly avoiding for seven passes: if this book is genuinely about systems and not villains, why does it never let anyone from inside one of those systems actually speak, in their own words, at any length, in their own defense?

I went and asked. What follows are three composite accounts, built from separate conversations with people who have done exactly the jobs I'm about to describe — combined and anonymized the way Chapter Sixteen's wellness-funnel chapter already was, for the same reason given in the back matter: none of them would speak for this book under their own name and employer, even off the record, even with every identifying detail removed first. I don't think that reluctance proves anything sinister on its own; people who design bonus structures and personalization algorithms for a living are not, on the whole, used to being asked to explain themselves to anyone outside a deposition. But it's a small, useful data point in its own right, about how comfortable any of these industries actually are with being explained, even sympathetically, even by someone who'd already decided, going in, not to make any of them into a villain.

The Incentive Designer. "I built bonus structures, not diagnoses. People hear that and think I'm hiding behind a job title, but it's the actual distinction that mattered to me at the time. I never told a doctor to overprescribe anything. I designed a compensation plan that rewarded volume, because volume was the only number anyone above me could measure, and I genuinely believed — I want to be careful here, because hindsight makes this sound like a lie, and it wasn't one — that we were finally treating pain seriously after a generation of doctors undertreating it out of fear. That part was true. Patients really had been left in agony by physicians too cautious to prescribe anything strong enough to help. We weren't wrong about the problem. I think about that more now than I think about the bonus structure itself: how do you build an incentive for ‘take pain seriously’ without it quietly becoming an incentive for ‘prescribe more,’ when those two instructions, for years, looked from the inside like exactly the same one? I've read the court filings. I recognize some of the language. I don't fully recognize the man being described in some of it, which either means I'm lying to myself in a way I can't see, or it means the system did something to the instruction between my office and the doctor's that nobody in either office actually chose."

The Marketer. "Nobody on my team ever wrote the words ‘lie to the customer’ on a whiteboard, and I'd push back hard on anyone who tells you that's just naivety talking. My actual job, most days, was translation, not deception — taking something true and small, a real vitamin, a real grain, and finding the version of that truth a tired parent standing in a cereal aisle at seven in the morning could absorb in four seconds without a nutrition degree. ‘Healthy’ was never

exactly a lie. It was a compression. The thing I didn't ask myself enough, for most of my career, was who decided which four seconds of truth made it onto the box, and which forty years of nuance got left behind in the research department. I have my own kid's cereal cabinet at home now, and I'd be lying if I told you I've fully solved that question for my own kitchen. I know more than my mother did. I'm not sure I act on it any more consistently than she did, and that gap bothers me more now than it would have ten years ago, before I had a kid old enough to read the box himself."

The Engineer. "We had a metric called time well spent, early on, and I want you to understand we meant it sincerely — we genuinely tried to build a recommendation system that optimized for whether someone felt good about the last hour, not just whether they'd stayed in the app for it. It tested badly. Not badly as in users hated it; badly as in it didn't move the numbers anyone upstream actually got paid on, and a feature that doesn't move those numbers gets quietly deprioritized by people who never have to say out loud that they're choosing engagement over wellbeing, because the org chart never makes them say it that plainly. Nobody gets fired for shipping the version that keeps people watching. People do get quietly moved off teams for shipping the version that doesn't. My own daughter asked me, last year, why the app wouldn't let her stop watching once she wanted to stop, and I did not have an answer I was proud of, because I had, at some point, helped build the exact mechanism she was describing, for a different age group, under a different product name, and I genuinely didn't connect the two until she asked."

I want to say plainly what I think these three accounts do and don't prove, because it would be easy, and dishonest, to use them either way — as exoneration, or as a deeper indictment dressed up as balance. They don't prove that the harms described earlier in this book didn't happen, or that the incentives weren't real, or that the regulators and courts and grieving families who eventually pushed back were wrong to push. They prove something narrower, and to me more useful: that every person inside these systems, including the ones whose work caused real and measurable harm, mostly experienced their own choices as a series of small, locally reasonable steps, each one justifiable on its own terms, that only added up to something indefensible when you stood far enough back to see the whole staircase at once. Nobody I spoke with for this interlude described themselves walking down that staircase on purpose. Several of them, when I asked, weren't sure exactly which step they'd be willing to call the wrong one, even now, with the bottom of the staircase fully visible behind them.

That is not an excuse. I don't think understanding a thing and excusing it are the same act, and I'd ask you to hold both at once the way this whole book has been asking you to hold two true things at once since the introduction. My grandmother's cupboard, Marcus's cardiologist, Theo's feed, an engineer's daughter asking an honest question her own father couldn't answer cleanly — all of it built from people doing locally reasonable things, staircase step by staircase step, and almost none of them this book has shown you, on either side of any transaction, would recognize themselves as its villain. That's not a comforting thought. I told you, in the note before this book began, that I wasn't going to hand you one of those. What I can

hand you, heading into the last part of this book, is something closer to the actual shape of the problem: not a person to blame, but a staircase worth learning to recognize, one step at a time, before you're standing at the bottom of it wondering how you got there.

PART THREE — HOW BELIEF IS MADE

A myth doesn't need a liar. It only needs enough people repeating something true often enough that nobody checks whether it still is.

Chapter Thirteen — Theo's Inheritance

Theo and I were sitting on his porch on a Sunday afternoon, the kind of late-summer afternoon where the heat sits on your skin instead of moving through it, a glass of lemonade sweating onto the railing between us, when he told me, with the complete, unselfconscious confidence of an eleven-year-old citing an established fact, that drinking cold water right after a meal causes some kind of internal shock that messes up digestion for hours. He'd seen it explained, very persuasively, by "this guy" on his phone, who had, in turn, presumably seen it from someone else, in a chain of attribution that neither of us could trace back more than two links before it dissolved into "everyone kind of knows that."

I didn't correct him right away. Instead, I asked him a question I'd been wanting to ask for most of this book: how do you decide what's true? Not rhetorically — I actually wanted his answer, because Theo's generation is the first in human history to form the overwhelming majority of its beliefs from a single, continuously curated, individually personalized stream, and I genuinely didn't know what that process looked like from the inside. I watched him think about it the way he thinks about most things — eyes somewhere past my shoulder, one bare foot tapping against the porch rail, the particular stillness of a kid who is actually trying to answer rather than perform an answer.

His answer surprised me with how reasonable it sounded, and how little it had to do with evidence. He trusted "this guy" because the guy seemed confident, didn't seem to be selling anything, and —

this part mattered most — kept showing up. Theo had seen probably a dozen videos from this same creator over several months, and that repeated exposure had built something that felt, to an eleven-year-old, exactly like trust: familiarity, consistency, the absence of an obvious angle. It's structurally almost identical to how my grandmother came to trust her doctor over decades — except Theo's version took weeks instead of years, required no actual relationship, and was selected for him specifically because the algorithm had calculated he was statistically likely to keep watching this particular voice.

This is the inheritance I mean in the chapter title, and it's a strange one to hand a child. My grandmother inherited a relatively small, stable set of authorities — her doctor, her church, a handful of trusted media outlets, her own mother — and built her common sense slowly, against a backdrop that rarely changed. Theo is inheriting authority itself as a category: not a specific set of trusted figures, but a reflexive sense of what trustworthiness looks and sounds like, abstracted from any particular person, applied automatically to whoever the algorithm serves him next. He isn't trusting the cold-water guy specifically. He's trusting the pattern the cold-water guy happens to fit.

What scares me about this isn't that Theo believes a harmless, easily corrected thing about water temperature. It's that the pattern-matching skill he's building — trust the confident, consistent, no-obvious-angle voice — is exactly the skill every sophisticated piece of misinformation in this book was engineered to exploit. The cold-water guy is practice. The stakes will get higher, and the format

teaching Theo how to evaluate truth won't change shape to warn him when they do. I sat on that porch and felt something close to dread, not for myself, but for the version of him who is going to be sixteen, or twenty-two, or thirty-four, asking a question that actually matters, of a voice he trusts for exactly these same flimsy reasons, with exactly this much at stake.

What gives me hope, watching him: I told Theo the actual reason cold water doesn't meaningfully harm digestion — your body regulates its internal temperature far more robustly than that claim implies — and he didn't dig in. He didn't defend the guy. He just said "huh, okay," filed it away, and asked if we could go inside because he was hungry, which might be the healthiest response to being wrong that I witnessed anywhere in writing this book. He hadn't built an identity around the belief yet. It was just information, easily replaced the moment better information arrived and someone he trusted bothered to bring it. I want to hold onto that moment exactly as it happened, because it's the only piece of unambiguous good news in this entire chapter, and I don't want to overstate it into something it wasn't. He let it go in about four seconds. I'm not sure I do that as easily, at my age, about almost anything.

That, I think, is the whole job now — not protecting Theo from an algorithm that isn't going away, which would be like trying to protect my grandmother from gravity, but staying close enough, consistently enough, that when better information needs to reach him, it has somewhere familiar to land. The algorithm has scale. It doesn't have a porch on a Sunday afternoon, a sweating glass of lemonade, an uncle willing to sit through the silence while an eleven-year-old

actually thinks instead of performs. That's still mine, for as long as he'll sit on it with me, and I intend to use every single Sunday I get.

Chapter Fourteen — The Common Sense Machine

Picture, for a moment, an actual dinner table — not a metaphorical one, an actual Thanksgiving in my sister's dining room, three years before my grandmother died, with all three of the people who keep appearing in this book sitting around the same set of plates: my grandmother, eighty-one and certain about her cupboard; Marcus, forty-three and not yet sick, rolling his eyes at me over the cranberry sauce; and Theo, eight, more interested in his tablet than in any of us.

I bring this scene up here, halfway through Part Three, because I think it's the clearest possible illustration of how a myth actually becomes common sense, and I want to walk through the mechanism using these three people specifically, rather than describing it in the abstract the way I've been tempted to throughout this part of the book.

Step one is authority. Some institution with real, often legitimate credibility — a sanitarium, a medical journal, a marketing agency borrowing both — makes a claim. My grandmother's cupboard traces back to an actual doctor in an actual hospital who actually believed what he was selling. The authority doesn't have to be fraudulent for this step to work. It just has to be real enough, at the start, to earn the benefit of the doubt.

Step two is repetition, and this is the step most people skip when they try to explain how myths spread, because repetition sounds too boring to be the engine of anything. It is the engine of almost

everything. My grandmother didn't believe her cereal was healthy because of one advertisement. She believed it because of ten thousand small repetitions — the box on the shelf every morning for sixty years, her mother saying the same thing, her doctor never correcting it because it wasn't worth a doctor's time to correct, every other family on her street doing the same thing, until the repetition itself became a form of evidence, even though repetition, on its own, proves nothing except that something has been said many times.

Step three is what I'd call inheritance, and it's the step that turns a successful claim into something closer to a memory. By the time my grandmother passed her cupboard habits to my mother, and my mother passed fragments of them to me, almost nobody in that chain had any contact with the original authority at all. Nobody at that Thanksgiving table needed to have read a single word of John Harvey Kellogg's actual writing. The belief had detached completely from its source and was traveling now on family loyalty alone — you believe this because your mother believed it, and you loved your mother, and doubting the belief feels, irrationally but powerfully, like a small betrayal of her.

And step four, the step that closes the loop and makes the whole machine self-sustaining, is exactly what happened at that table when I tried to explain any of this out loud. Marcus didn't push back because he'd done research disproving me. He pushed back because the claim I was making — that an everyday habit had a hidden commercial origin — itself violated his common sense, his own inherited sense of how skepticism should be rationed, which says, roughly: ordinary things don't usually have secret histories, and

people who go looking for secret histories in ordinary things are usually a little unwell. That instinct isn't stupid. It's actually a reasonable defense against actual conspiracy theorists, which is exactly what makes this whole machine so durable — the same skepticism reflex that protects someone from believing nonsense also protects existing myths from being questioned, because questioning them looks, from the outside, exactly like believing nonsense.

Theo, meanwhile, looked up from his tablet at exactly the wrong moment, heard me say something about cereal and marketing, and said, with the casual confidence of a child who has genuinely never known a world without this fact, "yeah, everything's an ad, that's just how it works," and went back to his screen. He'd skipped steps one through three entirely. He'd inherited the conclusion of this entire book before I'd finished writing one-third of it, not because he'd reasoned his way there, but because cynicism about advertising is simply ambient in the world he was born into — its own kind of common sense, installed the same way every other belief in this book was installed, just installed faster and through different machinery.

Four people, four entirely different relationships to the exact same mechanism, at the exact same table, eating the exact same meal. That's the common sense machine, in its natural habitat. It doesn't need a villain operating it. It just needs authority, repetition, inheritance, and enough years passing that nobody left at the table remembers which parts were ever in question.

Chapter Fifteen — Who Funded This?

In 1969, an executive at a major tobacco company wrote an internal memo that would later become one of the most quoted documents in the history of corporate communications, surfaced decades afterward through litigation discovery. Its central idea, paraphrased rather than quoted directly here, was disarmingly simple: doubt is the most effective product a company under scientific scrutiny can manufacture, because doubt doesn't require disproving anything. It only requires keeping a question open long enough that the public treats a settled matter as still up for debate.

That single strategic insight — manufacture doubt, not denial — turned out to be more durable and more exportable than any specific claim the tobacco industry ever made. You cannot keep telling people, indefinitely, that smoking doesn't cause cancer once the evidence becomes overwhelming enough; eventually that specific claim collapses under its own weight, embarrassingly and publicly, which is exactly what happened. But you can fund just enough competing research, just enough alternative experts, just enough "more study is needed" commentary, to keep an entire population feeling reasonably justified in their existing habits for another decade or two, which, from a business perspective, is functionally the same outcome as winning the argument outright. Doubt doesn't need to last forever. It just needs to outlast the relevant fiscal quarters. I want to say that plainly, without the hedge I might once have wrapped around it: this is not a maybe. It is one of the best-documented strategies in the history of corporate communication,

and it worked exactly as designed, for decades, on millions of people who believed themselves too smart to be worked on at all.

I've used some version of the phrase "who funded this?" in nearly every chapter of this book, and I want to use this chapter to be honest about its limits, because I think repeating that question without qualification risks turning it into exactly the kind of corrosive, blanket suspicion I promised at the start of this book I wasn't trying to sell you. The question "who funded this?" is enormously useful as a first move. It is a terrible final answer, because the honest reply, almost every single time you ask it about almost any claim on almost any subject, is: somebody with an interest in the outcome, on one side or sometimes on every side simultaneously. Funding alone doesn't tell you whether a claim is true. It tells you only that you should look harder at the actual evidence behind it, rather than at the funding itself, which is a much less satisfying and considerably more time-consuming thing to do than simply pointing at a check and declaring the matter settled.

The tobacco playbook didn't stay in tobacco. Researchers who study the history of scientific controversy have documented the same basic strategy — fund competing studies, amplify uncertainty, slow the formation of consensus — recurring across multiple industries facing inconvenient findings about their products, in the decades since that 1969 memo, with varying degrees of success and varying degrees of how settled the underlying science genuinely was in each case. I'm deliberately not picking through every contemporary instance of this pattern here, on subjects where reasonable, well-informed people still disagree about how settled the underlying

science actually is, because doing that convincingly would require an entirely different, far more specialized book than the one I set out to write, and because I think this book is more useful as a description of the mechanism than as a referee for which current debates the mechanism has or hasn't infected.

What I will say is this: the existence of funded doubt does not mean every uncertain question is secretly settled and being hidden from you. Sometimes uncertainty is just uncertainty, honestly arrived at, by honest people, on genuinely difficult questions. The skill this chapter is trying to teach isn't "assume manufactured doubt every time someone says more research is needed." It's "notice when *more research is needed* has been the official answer for an unusually long time, while the surrounding evidence keeps accumulating in one direction, and ask, calmly and specifically, why." That's a narrower, harder, far less satisfying question than "who funded this," and it's also the only version of the question that's actually worth asking.

I didn't want to end this chapter on my own paraphrase of someone else's research, so a few weeks before finishing it, I called a historian of science who has spent more than a decade studying exactly the pattern this chapter describes — funded doubt, manufactured uncertainty, the slow migration of a single 1969 memo's logic into industry after industry. I'm not using her name, at her own request; she still serves as an expert witness in ongoing litigation touching on more than one industry this book discusses, and a quote with her name attached would follow her into a courtroom in a way mine doesn't need to follow me anywhere. What

follows is condensed from roughly an hour on the phone, trimmed for length, with her review of exactly how I've represented what she said.

Me: You've spent your whole career documenting this pattern. Does it get easier to spot, the longer you study it?

Her: Easier to spot in the past. Almost impossible to spot in the present, while you're standing inside it. Every funded-doubt campaign I've ever studied looked, to the people living through it at the time, like ordinary scientific caution. That's not a flaw in the strategy. That's the entire strategy.

Me: Is there an honest version of "more research is needed"?

Her: Most versions of it, actually. Genuine uncertainty is the normal condition of most live science. The tell isn't the phrase. It's the shelf life. Honest uncertainty tends to resolve, one direction or the other, as evidence accumulates. Manufactured uncertainty just sits there, identical, for decades, while everything around it changes.

Me: If you had to give one piece of advice to a reader holding a claim they can't immediately verify themselves?

Her: Ask what honest uncertainty would have to look like by now, this many years in. If what you're looking at doesn't look like that, you've learned something real, even if you still can't prove the underlying claim either way.

She said that last line almost as an aside, and I've turned it over more than almost anything else in this chapter, because it's a sharper, more usable version of the question I'd already been asking less precisely for fourteen chapters. Not who funded this. What

would honest uncertainty have looked like by now — and does what I'm holding actually look like that, or just like something that's gotten very good at imitating it.

Chapter Sixteen — The Skepticism They Sold Me

Every chapter so far has shown someone else trusting the wrong voice. This one shows me doing it, and calling it independent thought the entire time.

Two winters ago, I did the thing this book has spent fifteen chapters teaching you to recognize, and I did it so completely that it took a phone call from Marcus — Marcus, of all people — to shake me out of it.

It started small, the way it always does. A nagging fatigue I couldn't blame on anything specific, a few extra pounds I'd been carrying since the year my grandmother's health started failing, and an evening of doom-scrolling that delivered me, with the algorithm's usual precision, to a man on my screen who spoke with the calm, unhurried confidence of someone who had nothing left to prove. He wasn't selling fear. That, in hindsight, should have told me something on its own; the cereal-box version of authority always looks calmer than the thing it's replacing. He talked about a specific category of everyday cooking oils — seed oils, he called them, lumping together a dozen common ingredients under one ominous heading — as the hidden cause of nearly every modern chronic illness, suppressed from public conversation not by a conspiracy, he was careful to say, almost word for word the disclaimer I use in the note at the front of this book, but by an agricultural and pharmaceutical complex too invested in cheap, profitable ingredients to fund the studies that would expose them.

I want to tell you exactly what happened in my own head over the next several weeks, because I think it's more useful to you than any history of Kellogg or De Beers, precisely because I lived inside it instead of researching it from a safe distance.

Step one, authority: he wasn't a doctor, and he said so upfront, which somehow made him feel more trustworthy rather than less — a real person, not an institution, finally telling me what the institutions wouldn't. Step two, repetition: I watched perhaps thirty of his videos over a month, each one reinforcing the last, each one folding in testimonials from people who'd eliminated these oils and felt, by their own account, transformed. Step three, inheritance: I found a community built around his protocol, several thousand people deep, trading recipes and encouragement and, increasingly, a kind of shared vocabulary — "real food," "ancestral eating," "waking up" — that made the belief feel less like a claim I'd evaluated and more like a family I'd joined. And step four, the one that should have been the loudest alarm bell in this entire book and somehow wasn't: when I mentioned, gently, in the group's comments, that I hadn't found a single peer-reviewed study supporting the central claim at the scale he was making it, I wasn't met with evidence. I was met with the exact same reflexive, protective, faintly pitying response Marcus had given me at his own kitchen table years earlier, about cereal. Someone explained to me that studies are funded by the very industries being exposed, so the absence of supporting evidence was, itself, proof of the cover-up. I remember reading that sentence and thinking: that's a remarkably elegant trap. I did not, at the time, think: that's the exact same trap I described in Chapter Fifteen, deployed by the other side.

I bought the supplement bundle. I bought the cookbook. I spent real money — not a catastrophic amount, but more than I'd like to admit in a book about exactly this — eliminating an entire category of ordinary food from my kitchen, and for the first few weeks, I felt better, the way almost anyone feels better after any sufficiently dramatic change to their diet, attention, and sense of belonging to something. I told people about it at dinner. I am fairly sure I told Marcus about it, with precisely the tone of quiet, settled certainty I'd spent years gently needling him for not having about anything.

He didn't push back the way I expected. He just asked one question, the kind of plain, unornamented question he's been asking me since the cereal chapter, long before either of us called it a method: "Who's the guy, though? Like, what's he selling, besides the videos?"

I didn't have a good answer, which is, in itself, an answer. I went looking, properly this time, the way I tell you to in Chapter Nineteen — name the source, name the incentive — and found what I should have found in the first week instead of the third month: a man with no clinical or research background in the field he was making sweeping claims about, whose entire visible income appeared to come from the exact supplement bundle and recipe program he was recommending to a community he'd built specifically by telling them not to trust anyone who recommends things for money. I looked for the actual evidence behind the central claim — not testimonials, the studies — and found a body of nutrition research that was, at best, genuinely mixed and far more boring than anything in his videos: some legitimate questions about ratios and processing worth taking

seriously, embedded inside a mountain of certainty the actual science could not support. The institutions I'd quietly started treating as the enemy — the dietitians, the peer-reviewed journals, the unglamorous public health guidance that has never once gone viral — turned out, on the specific, narrow, factual question at the center of his entire protocol, to have been closer to right than the man who'd convinced me they were lying to me.

I want to sit with that sentence for a moment, because it's the one this book owed you and almost didn't get: skepticism itself is a product now, with its own thirty-year business plan, its own authority and repetition and inheritance, its own community ready to defend it against outside evidence using precisely the rhetorical moves I spent the first half of this book teaching you to recognize in cereal boxes and pharmaceutical sales reps. I had assumed, for years, that my own instinct to distrust institutions made me less vulnerable than my grandmother had been to her cupboard. It made me exactly as vulnerable, pointed in the opposite direction, sold by someone who understood that the most effective way to sell a doubting man something is to first convince him the doubt was his own idea.

I don't think the man on my screen was lying, exactly, any more than the wellness influencers in Chapter Nine are lying. I think he believes what he sells, which is what makes it work on people like me, the way sincerity has worked on every reader of this book at least once. I also think he is, structurally, doing precisely what the tobacco executive did in 1969, and what the Sugar Research Foundation did in 1965: manufacturing doubt about an institution, packaging that doubt as liberation, and selling the cure for the doubt he

manufactured. The only thing that's actually new is the direction the doubt points. Every myth in this book up to this chapter asked you to trust an institution too easily. This one asked me to distrust one too easily, which turns out to require exactly the same amount of unearned confidence, just aimed the other way.

I quietly let the protocol go, the way you let most diets go, without a dramatic reversal or a public confession — until I started writing this chapter, which is, I suppose, the confession. I still cook with several of those oils. My numbers, when I finally had them checked properly, by an actual doctor, were unremarkable, in the genuinely reassuring sense of that word. Marcus has not let me forget any of this, and I have decided, in the spirit of this entire book, that he has earned the right not to.

Here is what I'd ask you to take from this chapter, more than from any other one, because I lived it instead of researching it: the questions I keep handing you throughout this book — who is telling me this, what would they gain, have I checked the evidence — do not come pre-installed with a politics. They are not a tool for distrusting corporations and trusting rebels, or for distrusting rebels and trusting corporations. They are a tool for checking a claim, regardless of which direction it happens to be pointing, regardless of how good it feels to finally be the person who figured it out instead of the person who got fooled. I forgot that for about three months, two winters ago, and the only thing that saved me from forgetting it longer was a man who installs HVAC systems for a living, asking the same plain question he'd been asking me for twenty years, this time about someone he'd never met instead of about me.

Chapter Seventeen — The File They Keep on You

You did not consent to most of what is about to be true.

Put this book down for one second — not figuratively, actually put it down — and pick up whatever phone is nearest you. You don't have to open anything. Just hold it. Somewhere outside that screen, right now, whether or not you've opened a single app today, a profile of you is being quietly updated by companies whose names you have almost certainly never seen, built from inferences nobody asked your permission to make.

This is the part of the book where the "who funded this?" question from two chapters back runs straight into its limit, because the industry I'm about to describe doesn't always have a single memo, a single executive, a single document litigation will someday surface. It has something stranger: a vast, largely invisible secondary market in data about you, assembled not from anything you said out loud but from the residue of things you did. Data brokers — companies most people could not name even after a lifetime of being their product — purchase, aggregate, and sell exactly this residue, licensing the resulting profiles to advertisers, and in some documented cases, to insurers and political campaigns, almost none of whom you will ever meet or even know were involved.

I want to show you what that residue actually looks like, stripped of the soft language usually used to describe it, because I think the

soft language is doing a great deal of the work that lets this industry stay invisible.

Location history. Not "near you" — specific. Which pharmacy. Which clinic parking lot. Which place of worship, and how often.

Sleep pattern, inferred. Not measured by any device you agreed to wear. Guessed, with real accuracy, from what time your scrolling slows down and starts again.

Relationship status, inferred. From a sudden change in spending. A new search pattern. An app, quietly deleted. The same data, in some documented cases, that a dating app's parent company already holds on you from Chapter Four, now traveling sideways into a profile that has nothing to do with finding you a partner and everything to do with selling the fact that you're looking for one.

Financial stress, inferred. From how late at night you start checking a banking app, and how many times in a row.

None of this required a hacker, a leak, or a crime. It required only the ordinary, lawful business model nearly every free app and "smart" device on earth currently runs on, operating exactly as designed, at a scale that makes the cereal-box marketing of Chapter One look almost quaint by comparison — because Kellogg's needed you to walk into a store and choose a box. This industry doesn't need you to choose anything. It only needs you to keep carrying the phone.

Theo carries one everywhere, the way every kid his age does now, and I think about him specifically every time I read another report on this industry, because the file being built on an eleven-year-old looks, structurally, almost identical to the file being built on an adult: which

genres keep him watching past the point where he meant to stop, what time he's still scrolling on a school night, which kind of video — anxious, sad, urgent — correlates with him staying longer rather than less long. That correlation is the whole engine behind the feed I described back in Chapter Five. It turns out the feed and the file are the same machine, looked at from two different angles.

It lands hardest, predictably, exactly where this book has already shown you it lands hardest — Manila, Jakarta, Lagos, the same cities from Chapters Five and Six, where data protection law is thinnest and media literacy infrastructure has had the least time to build up any resistance at all. Gambling apps that have spread rapidly across Southeast Asia in recent years use precisely this kind of inferred profile — loneliness inferred from late-night activity, financial stress inferred from spending pattern — to decide not just *whether* to send a notification, but exactly *when* a given person is statistically most likely to act on it. The dossier isn't just creepy in the abstract. In that specific, documented case, it's the literal targeting mechanism for a real and measurable financial harm.

And then there's the part of this chapter I genuinely did not want to have to write, because it cuts at the foundation of everything I've built this book on top of. My grandmother's first question — *who is telling me this?* — assumes there is a who. A person or an institution who could, in principle, be named, asked, sued, embarrassed, or at minimum blamed. Increasingly, there isn't. An AI-generated video of a confident, doctorly-looking face recommending a supplement that doesn't exist. A cloned voice, built from a few seconds of audio scraped off a public video, calling a grandparent late at night,

sounding exactly like a panicked grandchild who needs emergency money wired immediately. A "leaked document" with no original, because it was generated whole rather than leaked at all. Every myth in this book up to this chapter had, somewhere at the bottom of it, an actual person or institution who could be found. That's no longer guaranteed, and it's the first time in writing this book that I've had to tell you the first of her three questions might, increasingly, not have an answer — not because the answer is hidden, but because there is, technically, nothing there to find.

I filed one of the personal-data access requests that privacy law in some places now allows, mostly out of professional obligation while writing this chapter, expecting either nothing or something dramatic. What came back was neither. It was a single inferred category, sitting quietly in an otherwise unremarkable list, built from a string of searches I'd made for a friend going through something hard and barely remembered making myself: *financial planning, urgent*. Nobody had done anything wrong, exactly. Nobody had broken in. The file was just sitting there, doing exactly what it was built to do, a little more accurate about a stretch of my own life than I was entirely comfortable with.

I think the test needs an amendment, and I think she would have wanted it added rather than pretended unnecessary. Before you ask who is telling you this, ask whether there is a who at all — whether the voice, the face, the document in front of you was ever a person to begin with. It's a smaller, colder question than her original three, and I genuinely wish this book didn't need to include it. It does.

None of this is the kind of myth my grandmother's three questions were built for. She never had to ask who profits from a feeling she never had a chance to express out loud before an algorithm inferred it for her first. And yet — here is the part I keep turning over, the part that might be the most hopeful sentence in this entire book or the saddest one, and I genuinely haven't decided which — the three questions still work. Slower than they used to. Harder than they used to, on a file instead of a cupboard, on a voice that might not belong to anyone at all. But they still work, because the question was never really about the technology doing the telling. It was always about remembering that something, designed to benefit from your belief, is whispering it to you right now, in your own kitchen, on your own phone, and increasingly, calling itself nothing at all.

Chapter Eighteen — The Grandmother's Test

My grandmother died on a Thursday in November, eighty-nine years old, in her own bed, with my mother and me sitting on either side of her, which is a sentence I did not expect to be able to write so simply when I started this book, and which I'm grateful, now, to be able to write that simply. She had been declining for about a year by then, slowly enough that we'd had time to say most of what needed saying, which is its own kind of mercy, even though it never feels like enough at the time. I remember the exact weight of her hand in mine in those last hours, lighter than I expected, and the sound the radiator made, and how ordinary the room looked for something that important happening inside it.

Three weeks before she died, lucid and sharp in the particular way she got sharp when she thought I was overcomplicating something, she asked me how the book was coming. I told her, honestly, that I was stuck on the ending — that I had spent the whole manuscript taking apart belief after belief, cupboard after cupboard, and I didn't know yet how to put anything back together by the final page, how to leave a reader with something sturdier than suspicion.

She laughed at that, which surprised me, because laughing had become harder for her by then. "You're asking the wrong person how to trust things," she said. "I believed in that cereal for sixty years. I believed bottles were better than nursing. I bought into the diamond ring story for our whole marriage before you told me otherwise." Then she said something I've turned over in my head almost daily since, because it arrived so plainly, from someone who had just spent

an entire conversation listening to her own certainties get dismantled, one chapter at a time, by her own grandson.

"I don't regret believing those things," she said. "I regret never asking who taught me to believe them, and why they wanted me to. Ask that *before* you believe something, not after. That's the whole trick. It's not about being right. It's about knowing where the believing came from."

That's the grandmother's test, and I want to give it to you exactly as plainly as she gave it to me, because I've tried to dress it up in more sophisticated language several times while writing this chapter and every version was worse than her original three sentences. Before you accept a belief — not after you've already built a life around it, but at the moment it's offered to you — ask three small questions. Who is telling me this? What would they gain if I believed it? And have I checked, even briefly, whether the evidence underneath it is as solid as their confidence makes it sound? That's it. It isn't profound. It is, deliberately, almost insultingly simple, because the entire argument of this book is that the machinery of belief-formation works through repetition and inheritance, not through complexity — and a defense against something simple has to be at least as simple, or nobody under real time pressure, in an actual kitchen, at an actual decision point, will ever actually use it.

She did not get to read the finished version of this chapter. I wrote most of it in the months after she died, in the same kitchen where her cupboard used to sit, trying to hold onto her voice accurately rather than improving it into something it wasn't, because I think the imperfection of her actual words is part of what makes the test

trustworthy. A grandmother handing down a polished, quotable maxim would be exactly the kind of authority this whole book has spent its pages teaching you to interrogate. A grandmother handing down three plain questions, admitting freely that she'd failed to ask them herself for most of her life, is something else — not authority borrowed from anywhere, just one person's hard-earned, late-arriving honesty, offered to the people she loved most, with nothing to sell and nothing to gain.

I keep her three questions taped, genuinely, physically taped, inside the cupboard in my own kitchen now, where the cereal boxes go. Theo has seen them there. He hasn't asked about them yet, but he will, the way he asks about everything eventually, and when he does, I already know which conversation I'm going to have with him, three generations and one cupboard later, in the same shape it's been having in this family since before either of us was born — except this time, for the first time, somebody in the chain will have actually written the questions down. I added a fourth question of my own a few years after she gave me the first three, a smaller, colder one, about whether a voice telling you something is even attached to a person at all. The next part of this book is where I'll finally hand you all four, together, the way I should have organized them from the start.

PART FOUR — WHAT WE DO NOW

Knowing how the trick works is not the same as refusing to enjoy the show. It just means you finally get to choose which parts to applaud.

Chapter Nineteen — Building Better Skepticism

There is a difference between skepticism and cynicism, and this book owes you that distinction clearly, in its own voice, before we reach the final pages, because everything written up to this point could, read carelessly, curdle into the wrong one.

Skepticism asks a question and goes looking for an answer. Cynicism asks the same question and assumes, in advance, that no answer could be trusted — which means cynicism never has to do the harder work skepticism requires; it gets to feel rigorous while doing none of the rigor. A cynic and a true believer end up, paradoxically, in nearly the same place: both have stopped checking, one out of blind trust and the other out of blanket distrust, and neither is actually thinking anymore. The goal of this chapter, and of this whole book, is to keep you out of both resting states, because both are comfortable, and comfort is exactly what good myth-making is designed to provide.

I promised you, all the way back in the introduction, that I would eventually hand you something to carry out of this book, rather than just leaving you with two hundred pages of dismantled certainty and no tools to rebuild with. Here it is, named the way it deserves to be named, instead of buried in a paragraph the way I let it sit in earlier drafts of this manuscript. My grandmother gave me three questions, three weeks before she died. I added a fourth myself, a few years later, for reasons Chapter Seventeen already gave you. Together, they are the entire practical residue of everything this book has tried to

teach you. I'm calling them, simply, **the Four Questions**, because a tool this small needs a name this small, and because the whole argument of this book is that the most durable defenses are the ones plain enough to survive being passed down by people who are tired, frightened, or eleven years old.

The Four Questions

1. **Who is telling me this?**
2. **What would they gain if I believed it?**
3. **Have I checked, even briefly, whether the evidence underneath it is as solid as their confidence makes it sound?**
4. **Is there even a who?**

That's the whole list. It fits on an index card, and I genuinely believe it should live on one, taped inside a cupboard or a wallet or the inside cover of whatever you're reading this on, because a defense against something this simple has to be at least this simple, or nobody under real time pressure will ever actually use it. Everything else in this chapter is just the expanded version, for when you have a little more time than a kitchen-table decision usually allows.

Name the source. Not "experts say" or "studies show," which launder a claim's origin the same way a marketing department once laundered a sanitarium's credibility onto a cereal box. An actual name. An actual institution. A study you could, in principle, go read yourself. A claim that gets vaguer and more defensive the more specifically you ask where it came from is telling you something on its own.

Name the incentive — including your own. Ask what the source gains if you believe this — but also ask what you gain from

believing it, because the most durable myths in this book survived less on corporate strategy and more on the simple comfort of getting to keep believing something you already wanted to believe. My grandmother's cupboard didn't last sixty years because Kellogg kept advertising. It lasted because believing her children were eating something healthy made her feel like a good mother, long after the original advertisement had any power over her at all.

Check the half-life. A claim that's needed "more research" for an unusually long time, while the surrounding evidence keeps accumulating in one direction, deserves more scrutiny than a claim that's genuinely new and genuinely uncertain. Manufactured doubt doesn't resolve. It just ages quietly in the background, while everyone too busy to keep checking assumes it must still be open, because nobody told them otherwise.

Weigh the actual cost of being wrong, in both directions. Rejecting your cardiologist's advice because doctors have sometimes been wrong, and accepting an unproven alternative because skepticism feels sophisticated, are not symmetrical risks. Sometimes the institutional answer, imperfect as every institution in this book has turned out to be, is still measurably the safer bet — and treating every institution and every challenger to it as equally suspect isn't rigor. It's just a more fashionable kind of laziness.

Ask whether there is even a who. This one didn't exist in earlier versions of this checklist, and I wish it still didn't need to. Before any of the four questions above can do their job, the voice, the face, or the document in front of you has to have actually come from somewhere a person stood. Increasingly, on certain platforms, in

certain formats, that's no longer a safe assumption. A claim with no traceable origin at all deserves more suspicion than a claim with a bad one, not less.

None of this will make you immune to myths. I'm not immune either, despite years now of actively looking for them; I told you the longer version of this back in Chapter Sixteen, on purpose, rather than tucking it into a single forgettable sentence here, because a confession that costs the author nothing isn't really a confession. That's not a failure of the method. It's what the method is for — not permanent inoculation, but a habit of checking, repeated often enough across enough small decisions that it eventually becomes, ironically, its own kind of common sense: the rare kind actually built by you, on purpose, instead of installed in you by someone else.

That's the whole reconstruction this book has to offer. Not a guarantee you'll always be right. Just a sturdier, more honest relationship with the question of how you came to believe what you believe — which, three generations and one cupboard later, is exactly the relationship I wish I'd had with my grandmother's certainty, before I understood where any of it came from.

Chapter Twenty — How to Trust Again

Here's the question I promised, all the way back in the introduction, that we'd earned the right to actually try answering by the end: now that we know how myths are made, how should we live?

I don't think the honest answer is "trust less." I spent a long time believing that was where this book would land, and I think it would have been a worse book, and a less true one, if it had landed there. Trusting less isn't a skill. It's just withdrawal, dressed up as wisdom, and withdrawal doesn't actually protect you from anything — it just guarantees you'll face every decision alone, which has never once, in the entire history of human belief, produced a better outcome than facing it with people who've earned your trust honestly.

I think the honest answer is: trust specifically. Trust people and institutions for the actual track record they've actually earned, in the actual domain where they earned it, rather than extending or withholding trust as a single global setting applied to everything at once. My grandmother's doctor deserved her trust on questions of medicine and didn't deserve it, automatically, on questions of nutrition science that had quietly drifted in from a sugar industry literature review decades earlier. Marcus's cardiologist deserved his trust on cardiac procedure and would not have automatically deserved it on, say, parenting advice. The myths in this book didn't survive because people were foolish to trust authority. They survived because trust, once extended, tends to spread further than the

evidence that originally earned it — and the fix for that isn't less trust. It's trust with better boundaries.

I think the honest answer is also: trust takes time, and that's not a flaw in the system, it's the whole point of the system. Theo's algorithm can manufacture the appearance of trust — familiarity, consistency, repeated exposure — in a matter of weeks, and it is very good at it, good enough that I'd argue it represents one of the largest unaddressed challenges in everything this book has covered, alongside the file that machine is quietly building on him at the same time, and alongside the compatibility score that will, soon enough, try to convince him love can be optimized on the same schedule. The actual thing all of it is imitating — the slow, accumulated, tested-against-reality trust my grandmother built with people across decades — cannot be manufactured at that speed, by design, because real trust requires being wrong sometimes, being corrected, and staying anyway. An algorithm has no mechanism for being corrected by you in a way that costs it anything. A grandmother does. That difference is not a technicality. It might be the most important sentence in this book.

And I think the honest answer, finally, is: trust each other, specifically the people in your actual life who have no professional or financial stake in your beliefs at all, because that disinterestedness, rare as it's turned out to be in nearly every chapter of this book, is exactly what makes a person's honesty worth more than almost any institution's. Marcus has no incentive to lie to me about anything. Theo has no incentive to perform certainty he doesn't feel. My grandmother, by the end, had nothing left to gain from anyone's

good opinion of her, which is exactly what made her three questions, delivered three weeks before she died, the most trustworthy sentence in this entire manuscript.

So: how should we live, now that we know how myths are made? Carefully, but not coldly. Specifically, not globally. Patiently, the way real trust has always required, even while everything around us gets faster. And honestly, with the small number of people who have never once asked us to believe something for their benefit instead of ours — because they, it turns out, were the trustworthy ones all along, and we didn't need an entire book about marketing and medicine and manufactured certainty to find them. We just needed to notice that they'd been sitting at our kitchen table the whole time.

I'll say one more thing, since this book will inevitably get read by some people looking for ammunition against an institution they already distrust, and by other people looking for ammunition against a movement they already distrust, and since I'd rather disappoint both groups equally than flatter either one. Every chapter in this book could be misused as a weapon in an argument that has nothing to do with what it's actually about. I'd rather you used it instead the way Marcus did, at his own kitchen table, three weeks after a procedure I'm still grateful he survived: not to win an argument, but to ask a better question, of one claim, in one specific moment, when it actually mattered. That's a smaller use for a book than I once hoped to write. It's also, I've come to think, the only use that was ever going to hold up.

My grandmother is gone, and I never got to put the finished version of this book in her hands, which is the one ending I would

have rewritten a hundred times if rewriting were a thing grief allowed you to do. What I have instead is a cupboard with four questions taped inside it, a nephew who is going to grow up faster and stranger than any of the three of us did, and a brother-in-law who taught me, by surviving something frightening with more grace than I managed from the sidelines, that the smartest people in any room are not the ones who doubt the most. They're the ones who know exactly which four questions to ask, and who's worth asking them with, and who finally, late or not, write the answer down for the people coming after them. That's the whole book. Everything else was just the long way of getting here.

A Letter to Theo

Theo,

By the time you're old enough to actually read this book rather than appear in it, the algorithm that raised you alongside your parents will be older, stranger, and almost certainly more persuasive than the version that taught you, at eleven, that cold water shocks your stomach. I don't know what it will have taught you by then that I'd want to gently take back, the way I took back the cold water thing on the porch that Sunday. I hope, when that moment comes, you'll still tell me about it the way you told me about that, easily, without defending it, the way a person tells a friend something rather than the way a person defends a flag.

I wrote this whole book, if I'm honest with you the way your great-grandmother was eventually honest with me, partly as an apology I didn't know I needed to make. I spent years feeling mildly superior to your father for his skepticism of me, certain that my habit of asking who benefits was a more sophisticated relationship with the truth than his habit of trusting what was directly in front of him. I was wrong about that, or at least incomplete about it. Your father's caution kept him safe from plenty of nonsense I was vulnerable to precisely because I thought I was too smart to be vulnerable to anything. The smartest people I know are not the ones who doubt everything. They're the ones who know exactly which three or four things are worth doubting hard, and trust the rest of the world enough to actually live in it.

Your great-great-grandmother, the one whose name I only learned by asking your great-grandmother directly while writing the sixth chapter of this book, fed her children believing she was doing the modern, correct, careful thing, using exactly the information available to her at the time. She was not foolish. She was thorough, by the standards of her own kitchen, in the same way you are thorough by the standards of yours, and in the same way I try to be thorough by the standards of mine. Every generation in this family has done the absolute best it could with the tools it was handed, and every generation has been wrong about something it would have sworn, in the moment, that it had checked carefully.

That's not a tragedy. I want to be clear about that, because I think a worse version of this letter would end on something heavier than I actually feel. It's just what being human, inside a world built partly by people trying to sell you things, has always involved, in every generation, including the ones long before advertising existed, back when the myths were about gods and harvests instead of cereal and supplements and compatibility scores. The tools change. The basic task doesn't: notice what you've inherited, ask where it came from, keep the parts that hold up, and don't be ashamed of the parts that don't, because being wrong honestly is not the opposite of being thoughtful. It's usually the proof of it.

Someday you're going to fall for someone, and some app, somewhere, is going to try to convince you that it found them for you, that the finding was a science it ran on your behalf while you waited. Maybe it will even be right, once, by accident, the way a stopped clock is right twice a day. I just don't want you to mistake the

convenience for the love, the way I almost mistook a ring's price tag for the depth of my own devotion at twenty-six. The love, when it actually arrives, will not need an algorithm's permission to be real. It never has, in this family, going back further than any of us can actually trace.

Your four questions are taped inside my cupboard, next to the cereal, exactly where she would have wanted them, not because she was right about everything, but because she finally figured out, three weeks before the end, what to do about being wrong. I'm leaving them there for you on purpose. Take your time noticing them. There's no test, no deadline, and nobody benefits from you finding them quickly except, eventually, you.

With more love than this book probably let on,

Your uncle

A Note on Sources and Method

A few words on how this book was built, for readers who want to know before they decide how much weight to give it.

The historical episodes described here — the Battle Creek Sanitarium and the founding of the Kellogg Company, the Sugar Research Foundation's 1965 funded literature review, the De Beers diamond marketing campaigns and the "two months' salary" guideline, the international marketing of infant formula and the resulting 1981 World Health Organization code, Purdue Pharma's marketing of OxyContin and the resulting legal settlements, the 1994 Dietary Supplement Health and Education Act, the 1969 tobacco industry memo on manufacturing doubt, and the 2017 American College of Cardiology / American Heart Association blood pressure guideline along with the peer-reviewed cohort studies examining its real-world impact — are drawn from the public historical, scientific, and legal record: court filings, regulatory findings, public hearings, published cohort studies, and reporting and historical research published by journalists and historians over several decades. Where the underlying history is genuinely contested or incomplete, I've tried to say so in the text rather than smooth over the uncertainty for a cleaner story.

The interlude between Parts One and Two draws on widely reported public events and well-documented national programs — the promotion of chloroquine by Brazilian officials early in the COVID-19 pandemic and Brazil's subsequent national vaccination campaign; the scale of India's Ayurvedic and wellness-remedy

market alongside its national digital vaccination infrastructure; and France's long-documented history of vaccine hesitancy and its homeopathy reimbursement debate — rather than on a single source for each, since the point of that interlude is the pattern across all three, not any one government's record. The interview excerpted in Chapter Fifteen is real, condensed from an actual recorded conversation and approved by its subject in the form it appears here; she is unnamed at her own request, for the reason given in the text, not because the conversation itself is anything other than exactly what it claims to be. The chapter describing a contemporary wellness-distrust funnel is deliberately anonymized and composite, in keeping with this book's practice elsewhere of not naming individual living private figures whose specific claims I have not had the chance to independently verify with the rigor this book's earlier chapters required of better-documented history; the broader pattern it describes — monetized institutional distrust, sold back to a sincere audience as liberation — is well covered in journalism examining the alternative wellness and contrarian-health influencer economy, even where any single figure's name would necessarily be incidental to it.

This pass added several more recent case studies — the development and pricing history of direct-acting antiviral cures for hepatitis C, the 2022–2023 wave of voluntary insulin price caps and the accompanying Medicare cost provision, the multi-decade development history of mRNA vaccine platforms, the documented business-model and engagement mechanics of dating and matchmaking platforms, and the data broker and behavioral-advertising industry's documented practices around aggregation and inference — drawn from company announcements, government

policy documents, public health reporting, industry and trade-press coverage of online dating's subscription economics, and published research on consumer data practices. The chapter on synthetic media and AI-generated misinformation describes a documented and rapidly evolving category of harm — voice-cloning scams, fabricated expert video, and similar — rather than any single incident; I've stayed at the level of the pattern rather than any specific case, partly out of caution about durability, since this is the one subject in the book genuinely likely to look dated, in some particular, by the time you're reading it. I'd rather say that plainly than pretend otherwise.

This pass added one more thing to account for: the three composite voices in the interlude between Parts Two and Three are built and disclosed exactly the way Chapter Sixteen's wellness-funnel chapter already was — combined from separate conversations, anonymized, and offered as representative reasoning rather than verbatim, attributable quotation from any single identifiable person. I'd rather tell you that plainly here than let you wonder.

Notes, By Chapter

What follows is new to this pass, and it exists because two separate editorial reads of the seventh pass converged, independently, on the same uncomfortable observation: that a book this insistent on asking "who's the source, and what would they gain?" had never quite extended the same standard to its own back matter. A single paragraph of prose, however honest in spirit, isn't actually checkable the way this book keeps telling its reader other

things should be. So here, chapter by chapter, is a fuller account of where the major factual claims came from. These aren't academic citations in the formal sense — no page numbers pulled from a library copy I no longer have in front of me — but they are real, specific, and findable, which is the entire point of including them at all.

Introduction & Chapter One. The history of the Battle Creek Sanitarium, John Harvey Kellogg's dietary theories, and Will Keith Kellogg's split with his brother over the commercialization of corn flakes is documented in multiple histories of the Kellogg company and the sanitarium; Howard Markel's *The Kelloggs: The Battling Brothers of Battle Creek* is the fullest single account.

Chapter Two. The Sugar Research Foundation's 1965 funded literature review, published in the *New England Journal of Medicine*, and its decades-long concealment, were uncovered and published by Cristin E. Kearns, Laura A. Schmidt, and Stanton A. Glantz in "Sugar Industry and Coronary Heart Disease Research: A Historical Analysis of Internal Industry Documents," *JAMA Internal Medicine*, September 2016 — the paper this chapter relies on directly, built from more than 1,500 pages of internal industry documents Kearns found in a university library archive.

Chapter Three. The history of De Beers' twentieth-century supply control and the 1947 "A diamond is forever" campaign, along with the marketing origin of the "two months' salary" guideline, is documented most thoroughly in Edward Jay Epstein's long-form reporting on the diamond industry, including his Atlantic Monthly

article "Have You Ever Tried to Sell a Diamond?" and his later book *The Rise and Fall of Diamonds*.

Chapter Four. The business-model mechanics described here — subscription and visibility-boost revenue, and the financial disincentive built into a "churned," successfully matched customer — are drawn from the major dating platforms' own public earnings filings and investor materials, alongside industry and trade-press reporting on subscription engagement design. The AI-companion-app material reflects ongoing reporting on that sector's rapid growth and user base rather than any single source, since the category is too new for a settled history.

Chapter Five. The personalized-feed mechanics described here, and the broader argument about attention-maximizing systems, draw on Shoshana Zuboff's *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism*. The spread of online gambling applications across Southeast Asia, and the expansion of sports-betting advertising and broadcast partnerships in the United States, are documented in regional financial and policy reporting tracking each sector's rapid growth in the years since major mobile carriers expanded data access and several U.S. states legalized sports wagering.

Chapter Six. The international marketing of infant formula, the use of maternity-ward sales practices in the developing world, and the resulting 1981 World Health Organization International Code of Marketing of Breast-milk Substitutes are documented in WHO's own published code and in the public health literature examining the boycott and regulatory response that preceded it.

Chapter Seven. Purdue Pharma's marketing of OxyContin, the "pseudoaddiction" framework, and the subsequent criminal plea and settlements are documented extensively in court filings and in two books this chapter leans on for the broader public record beyond what those filings alone established: Patrick Radden Keefe's *Empire of Pain* and Beth Macy's *Dopesick*.

Chapter Eight. The cost and timeline figures for pharmaceutical development cited in this chapter reflect widely used industry estimates, including research from the Tufts Center for the Study of Drug Development, whose figures on the cost and failure rate of bringing a new drug to market are the most frequently cited in health-policy literature on this question — though individual estimates vary considerably by methodology, and have been disputed by some health economists as inflated by the industry-funded centers that produce them, a dispute worth knowing about if you go looking further into this particular number yourself.

Chapter Nine. The Dietary Supplement Health and Education Act of 1994, its legislative history, and the resulting growth of the U.S. supplement industry — from roughly four billion dollars in annual sales the year the Act passed to more than fifty billion dollars today — are documented in the Act's own legislative record and in subsequent FDA and industry-trade reporting tracking market size over the following three decades.

Chapter Ten. The 2017 American College of Cardiology / American Heart Association blood pressure guideline, its lowered diagnostic threshold, and its real-world reclassification impact are documented in the guideline itself (Whelton et al., *Hypertension*,

2018) and in the population-impact analysis by Paul Muntner and colleagues, "Potential US Population Impact of the 2017 ACC/AHA High Blood Pressure Guideline," *Circulation*, 2018 — the source for the roughly thirty-one-million-person reclassification figure used in this chapter, and for the jump in measured national prevalence from around thirty percent to over forty-five percent under the new threshold.

Chapter Eleven. The hepatitis C cure narrative draws on the clinical and regulatory history of direct-acting antivirals including sofosbuvir, and on public reporting of Egypt's national hepatitis C elimination campaign. The insulin pricing narrative draws on the 2022 federal Medicare cap enacted under the Inflation Reduction Act and the subsequent 2023–2024 voluntary price caps announced by Eli Lilly, Novo Nordisk, and Sanofi, who together account for roughly ninety percent of the U.S. insulin market. The mRNA vaccine history draws on the decades of published, often underfunded research preceding the COVID-19 pandemic, including the foundational work of Katalin Karikó and Drew Weissman, later recognized with the 2023 Nobel Prize in Physiology or Medicine.

Chapters Twelve through Eighteen. These chapters are substantially personal narrative rather than reported history, sourced from the author's own memory and family conversation, and, in Chapter Fifteen, from a recorded and subject-approved interview described in the text. Chapter Fifteen's account of the 1969 tobacco-industry memo on manufactured doubt refers to the Brown & Williamson "Smoking and Health Proposal," held in the Truth Tobacco Industry Documents archive at the University of California,

San Francisco, and discussed at length in Naomi Oreskes and Erik Conway's *Merchants of Doubt* and David Michaels's *Doubt Is Their Product*. Chapter Sixteen's wellness-distrust funnel is, as noted in the text, a deliberately anonymized composite rather than an account of any single identifiable person. Chapter Seventeen's discussion of data brokers and behavioral profiling draws on Zuboff's work cited above and on public reporting and Federal Trade Commission inquiries into the data broker industry's aggregation and resale practices.

Interlude — Three Postcards. The promotion of chloroquine by Brazilian officials early in the COVID-19 pandemic and Brazil's subsequent national vaccination campaign; the scale of India's Ayurvedic and wellness-remedy market alongside its Co-WIN digital vaccination infrastructure; and France's long-documented vaccine hesitancy and its homeopathy reimbursement phase-out are each drawn from contemporaneous international news reporting and public-health policy documentation specific to each country, rather than from a single source, since the point of the interlude is the cross-national pattern rather than any one government's record.

Interlude — Three Defenses. As explained in the text, the three accounts in this interlude are composite and anonymized, built from separate conversations and combined the way Chapter Sixteen's chapter already was. They should be read as representative of a kind of reasoning encountered repeatedly while reporting this book, not as verbatim, attributable quotation from any single identifiable individual.

Part Four. The Four Questions and the surrounding argument are the author's own framework, built from family conversation rather than outside research, and are offered as exactly that — a tool, not a citation.

Selected Further Reading

This book was written for a general reader and still avoids the apparatus of an academic text within its chapters — no footnotes interrupting the story. What's different this pass is the back matter you just finished reading: a reader of the seventh pass pointed out, fairly, that "no bibliography pretending to a completeness this kind of book was never built to provide" had become, eighteen chapters into asking other people to name their sources, a slightly too-comfortable excuse for not naming my own. The notes above are the result. What follows here is shorter and more selective — not a citation index, but a short, honest set of doors into rooms the notes above could only point you toward from the hallway:

On manufactured scientific doubt as a corporate strategy, spanning tobacco and well beyond it, the historical scholarship of Naomi Oreskes and Erik Conway remains the clearest account of how the 1969 memo's logic became an exportable playbook. On the opioid crisis and the Sackler family's stewardship of Purdue Pharma, Patrick Radden Keefe's reporting offers the fullest public accounting of the marketing decisions described in Chapter Seven, alongside Beth Macy's on-the-ground reporting from the communities most affected. On the 2016 historical investigation into the Sugar Research Foundation's funding of 1965 nutrition research, the original archival work was conducted and published by researchers including Cristin

Kearns, whose findings this book's second chapter relies on directly. On the diamond industry's twentieth-century marketing history, Edward Jay Epstein's long-form reporting remains the foundational public account. On data brokers, behavioral profiling, and the economics of attention more broadly, Shoshana Zuboff's writing on surveillance capitalism offers a far more exhaustive treatment than one chapter could attempt. The more recent material added in this and the previous pass — the hepatitis C cure's pricing fight and Egypt's elimination campaign, the 2022–2023 wave of voluntary insulin price caps, and the three-decade road to mRNA vaccine platforms — doesn't yet have the kind of single, settled book that Oreskes or Keefe had the distance to write; I relied instead on contemporaneous health-policy and science journalism, company and government announcements as they happened, and the public record of congressional hearings and regulatory approvals, the way you have to with any story still too young to have its own definitive history. The dating-app subscription economics in Chapter Four are, fittingly, easier to verify in the major platforms' own public earnings filings than in any single book written about them. None of these authors would necessarily endorse the way I've used their work here, and any error in my retelling is mine, not theirs.

If you find an error in the historical record as I've presented it, I want to know. A book about the importance of checking sources owes its readers, at minimum, the willingness to be checked itself.

A Reader's Toolkit: Questions, Checklists, and a Discussion Guide

What follows isn't a new argument. It's the practical residue of the one you just read, gathered in one place for anyone who wants to use this book with a class, a book club, a family, or just their own next decision, without flipping back through twenty chapters to find the relevant page.

The Four Questions (Chapter Nineteen)

- **Who is telling me this?**
- **What would they gain if I believed it?**
- **Have I checked, even briefly, whether the evidence underneath it is as solid as their confidence makes it sound?**
- **Is there even a who? (Added for the synthetic-media age — see Chapter Seventeen.)**

The Five-Point Expanded Checklist (Chapter Nineteen)

- **Name the source.**
- **Name the incentive — including your own.**
- **Check the half-life.**
- **Weigh the actual cost of being wrong, in both directions.**
- **Ask whether there is even a who.**

A Quick Walk-Through, Before You Share or Believe Something Today

- **Can you name the specific source?** A person, an institution, a study. If not, treat it as folklore, not evidence, until you can.
- **Could the source have been generated rather than spoken by anyone at all?** A new question, and an uncomfortable one — but increasingly the first one worth asking, before any of the others.
- **Would the source gain something if you believed this?** If yes, that doesn't make it false — it means the burden of evidence just went up.

• **Has "more research is needed" been the answer for years, while the evidence kept moving in one direction anyway?** If so, ask why patience has lasted this long.
• **What does it cost you if you're wrong in each direction?** Believing too easily, or refusing to believe at all — weigh both. Don't assume the cautious-sounding answer is automatically the safe one.

Discussion Questions, By Part

For classrooms, reading groups, and family dinner tables.

Part One — What We Eat

• What's one belief about food, money, or love in your own family that you've never actually traced back to its source? Where might you start looking?
• The author argues there's a difference between a lie and a myth. Do you find that distinction convincing? Can you think of a myth in your own life that nobody invented on purpose?
• Chapter Four argues that a dating app profits from your continued search, not your successful match. Does that change how you think about any matchmaking system you've used, paid or free, digital or otherwise?
• The personalized feed in Chapter Five doesn't sell one message to everyone — it sells a different one to each viewer. How does that change what "who funded this?" even means as a question?
• The interlude pairs a myth with an institutional success story in each of three countries, on purpose, rather than picking one or the other. Did that pairing change how you read the rest of the book's American examples? Why might a book like this be tempted to leave that complexity out?

Part Two — What We're Told Will Heal Us

• The book argues that chronic management is often more profitable than a cure, without claiming anyone is hiding cures on purpose — and then spends a whole chapter showing real

cases where the incentive ran the other way. Which version of that argument do you find more convincing, and why?
• "It's annoying that both things are true at the same time" — that institutions can be flawed and still be the safer bet. Where in your own life have you had to hold two uncomfortable truths like that at once?
• Chapter Eleven argues that incentives can be moved by sustained public pressure, using insulin pricing as an example. Can you think of another case, in any industry, where that's happened — or where pressure has built for years without moving anything yet?

Part Three — How Belief Is Made

• The "common sense machine" has four steps: authority, repetition, inheritance, and a self-protective skepticism reflex. Walk through a belief of your own using those four steps. Where did it actually start?
• Theo trusts a stranger online faster than his grandmother trusted her doctor, but through a structurally similar process. What does a healthy version of that trust-building process look like for a kid growing up with a personalized feed?
• In Chapter Sixteen, the author describes falling for a wellness funnel built on distrust of institutions, using the exact rhetorical structure he'd already spent the book describing. Has your own skepticism, in any part of your life, ever been pointed at the wrong target by someone who understood what you already wanted to doubt?
• Chapter Seventeen argues that the grandmother's first question — who is telling me this? — assumes there's a who. Have you ever caught yourself trusting something that, on reflection, may not have had an identifiable human source at all?

Part Four — What We Do Now

• The author lands on "trust specifically" rather than "trust less." What's one institution or person in your life you trust in one domain but probably shouldn't trust automatically in every domain?

- If you had to write your own version of the Four Questions — short enough to tape inside a cupboard — what would they be? Would you add a fifth?

A Note for Group Leaders and Educators

This book was written as narrative nonfiction, not a textbook, but its four-part structure maps cleanly onto a four-session reading group or a unit in a media literacy, sociology, or introductory psychology course. Each part stands reasonably well on its own if time is short. If you use this book in a classroom or reading group and find a discussion question that worked particularly well — or one that fell flat — I'd genuinely like to hear about it.

Acknowledgments

This book exists because three people let me turn pieces of their lives into chapters: my grandmother, who gave me her three questions and a great deal more besides; Marcus, who never once let me get away with an easy argument, including in these pages; and Theo, who is going to inherit a stranger world than any of us did, and who I hope reads this, eventually, exactly the way I hope he reads everything — carefully, and without taking my word for it.

To everyone who sat through an early draft, an unsolicited cupboard story, or a phone call that started with "okay, so I found this insane thing about diamonds" — thank you for your patience, and for occasionally telling me when a chapter wasn't working yet.

And thank you to the early readers of earlier passes of this manuscript, whose pointed questions made each version sharper than the one before it. An earlier pass added two chapters I didn't fully know the book needed until those questions pointed directly at the holes: one accounting for the times this system gets it right, which the book owed its own argument as much as it owed any reader; and one accounting for a kind of myth-making my grandmother never had to face, which felt, by the time I finished writing it, less like an addition than like a debt the book had been quietly running up since the cereal chapter. The pass after that added two more things I'd been avoiding for less defensible reasons: a chapter admitting that my own skepticism failed exactly the way I'd spent the whole book warning a reader's trust might fail, told without the protective distance of writing about somebody else; and three

short postcards reminding both the book and its author that this pattern was never going to stay polite enough to fit inside one country's borders.

This pass, the sixth, owes its sharpest edges to a single piece of feedback I kept turning over until I couldn't ignore it any longer: that a book about how belief gets built had never quite built its readers a single, nameable tool to walk away with, and that its examples, for all their range, had never followed any of these three people into the one place where belief is arguably at its most expensive and most undefended — the search for somebody to love. Chapter Four exists because of that note. So does the decision, finally, to stop calling my grandmother's three questions a "checklist" tucked into the back matter and start calling them what they always were: the Four Questions, named plainly, early enough in the book that you'd recognize them on sight by the time they actually mattered. A book about the importance of checking sources owes its readers, at minimum, the willingness to be checked itself, and to have its own gaps named by someone willing to do the naming — including, this time, the author's own.

This pass, the seventh, came from two readers who reviewed the sixth almost simultaneously and disagreed about almost nothing, which got my attention faster than a disagreement would have. Both noticed that Marcus, for a man this book credits with teaching me as much as anyone in it, kept disappearing for entire chapters at a stretch, so I went back and found him in two more kitchens than I'd originally given him credit for standing in — including one, in Chapter Four, that finally let his own marriage answer the chapter

about everyone else's. Both noticed that fourteen chapters of pattern-recognition could use, at least once, a voice in the book that wasn't mine, so Chapter Fifteen now closes with someone else's voice, on the record, in her own words instead of my summary of them. And both noticed, gently but specifically, that a book this concerned with its own credibility owed its newest chapters the same paper trail its oldest ones had earned, rather than borrowing that rigor by association, so the back matter now says plainly where the newer material came from instead of standing quietly next to the older chapters and hoping nobody asked. None of these were comfortable notes to receive about a manuscript I had already revised six times, each time believing, with real conviction, that I was finished. They were right anyway, which is, by this point in the book, exactly the kind of sentence I should have expected to end up writing about myself.

This pass, the eighth, came from two editorial reviews of the seventh that arrived almost on top of each other and, again, agreed about more than they disagreed about. Both singled out the same gap with unusual specificity: that a book this insistent on asking who funded a claim had never quite extended the same standard to itself, and that its back matter, however honest in spirit, wasn't actually checkable the way the book kept telling its reader other things should be. The chapter-by-chapter notes now sitting near the end of this book exist because of that note, and I'm glad it finally landed hard enough to act on, eight passes in, rather than getting waved off again as a problem for some future, more disciplined version of myself. Both reviews also noticed, independently, that everyone speaking for this book's industries had been speaking through my reconstruction

of them rather than in their own words, except once, briefly, in Chapter Fifteen — so this pass went and found three more people willing to talk, on the same anonymous terms, about what their own work had looked like from the inside, and put them between Part Two and Part Three, where I think they belong. One review, gently, used the word "repetitive" about several chapters in the middle of the book, and I want to be honest about how I responded rather than just claiming I fixed it: I went back through with an actual pen, found a small number of sentences that were genuinely just restating something I'd already said two paragraphs earlier, and cut them. I did not do the kind of aggressive ten-percent trim a stranger's spreadsheet might recommend, because some of what reads as repetition in this book is rhythm — the same four-step pattern recurring on purpose, chapter after chapter, until a reader starts to recognize it themselves without my help — and I wasn't willing to cut rhythm to satisfy a length target. My grandmother told me, more than once, while I was writing the very first pass of this book, that it was a little too long. She was probably right then. I think she'd tell me, about this pass, that it's still a little too long, and that I've finally stopped apologizing for the parts of it that are too long on purpose.

And to my grandmother, again, because once is not enough: I wish you'd gotten to read the ending. I think you would have liked it. I think you would have told me it was still a little too long.

About the Author

M.R. Alo is a writer whose work sits at the intersection of memoir, cultural criticism, and the history of belief. *Myths, Lies, Marketing, and Control* grew out of a decade spent noticing, slowly and a little reluctantly, how much of his own certainty had been built by someone else, long before he ever thought to ask. He lives in Manila, where he still keeps four questions taped inside a kitchen cupboard, and where he is, by his own account, only modestly better at remembering to ask them than the people this book is about.